

THE RED PRIEST AND HIS SACRED MUSIC:
AN EXAMINATION OF ANTONIO VIVALDI'S *NISI DOMINUS*, RV 608

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PREFACE

While the *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola, e basso, RV 608* is but one example of Vivaldi's contribution to many genres of music, vocal and instrumental, sacred and secular, it proves an excellent vehicle to study every aspect of the composer's life, environment and influences—a window into the world of 18th-century Venice and all that shaped the man and his music.

Searching for the origins and history of Vivaldi's manuscripts illustrates what a complete rebirth the composer has enjoyed in just the last century. Rescued from near oblivion, scholars and audiences alike are now coming to know the massive scope of his *oeuvre* and the multitude of genres to which he contributed. Although a sacred vocal work, *Nisi Dominus* identifies many traits and customs of Vivaldi's compositional techniques which transcend that singular genre and point to his characteristics of instrumental and operatic writing as well. Many of these techniques are represented in the movement-by-movement discussions as well as the section on the performer's perspective. Although addressed specifically towards examples in *Nisi Dominus*, the general themes and topics find application across much of the music of the baroque, again signifying Vivaldi's prominent place in that era of music.

Furthermore, by examining the beguiling society of the glorious Republic of Venice in the 17th and 18th centuries, one is able to see what a profound influence religion and the peculiarities of Venetian culture had on the music of the era. These are the circumstances and environments which shaped Vivaldi as a priest, a man, and a composer. The significance of the institution for which he worked and composed is also revealed: these *ospedali grandi* not only shaped the music of the city of Venice and

guided what compositions Vivaldi was required to produce, but also became part of the antecedents of the music conservatory system.

Unique to this paper is the study of Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus* score from a vocal performer's perspective. The peculiarities of learning/preparing this piece for performance, as well as application to the overall dimension of baroque music are examined through discussions on text-painting, learning tools and techniques, and opportunities for expression of style. The score commentary sections are also geared towards the vocalist's overall conception and history of the composer and the work. To consider all these aspects together provides the student of this score with a complete picture of context, form, history, culture, and technique across a broad spectrum of Vivaldi's works. In this way, *Nisi Dominus* proves itself to be an excellent window into the life of the brilliant baroque composer, many of his compositional techniques and devices, the curious and enchanting society of La Serenissima and its rich musical heritage, forms and history of western liturgy, and the refreshing and exciting challenges of bringing all of this to life in the performance of Antonio Vivaldi's music.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
PREFACE	v
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES	ix
CHAPTER 1: THE REDISCOVERY OF VIVALDI	1
CHAPTER 2: THE RED PRIEST	11
CHAPTER 3: THE <i>OSPEDALI GRANDI</i> AND VIVALDI	18
CHAPTER 4: LA SERENISSIMA	30
CHAPTER 5: THE DIVINE OFFICE	40
CHAPTER 6: TRACING A TRANSLATION	48
CHAPTER 7: SCORE COMMENTARY	
I. Nisi Dominus	52
II. Vanum est vobis	55
III. Surgite	58
IV. Cum dederit	62
V. Sicut sagittae	67
VI. Beatus vir	70
VII. Gloria Patri	72
VIII. Sicut erat	79
IX. Amen	81
CHAPTER 8: THE VOCAL PERFORMER'S PERSPECTIVE	83
CHAPTER 9: ORIGINAL SOURCES AND VIVALDI'S COPYISTS	90
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY	97

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Vesper Psalms at the Venetian <i>Ospedali Grandi</i>	43
Table 2. Psalter comparison by translation	50
Table 3. <i>Scordatura</i> tuning	75

LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1. Opening of <i>Nisi Dominus</i>	53
Example 2. Measures 15-21 of <i>Vanum est vobis</i>	56
Example 3. Opening of movement 3 (<i>Surgite</i>)	59
Example 4. Measures 3-5 of <i>Surgite</i>	59
Example 5. <i>Passus duriusculus</i> technique in <i>Surgite</i>	61
Example 6. Compositional techniques in <i>Cum dederit</i> opening measures	64
Example 7. Vivaldi's allusive motive	65
Example 8. Text painting in <i>Sicut sagittae</i>	68
Example 9. Operatic treatment in the vocal line	69
Example 10. Opening of <i>Beatus vir</i>	71
Example 11. Opening of <i>Gloria Patri</i>	76
Example 12. Coloratura passage in <i>Sicut erat</i>	79
Example 13. Measures 93-98 of <i>Amen</i>	82
Example 14. Legato opportunity	84
Example 15. Movement 6, measures 4-6 text cells	84
Example 16. Movement 7, measures 50-53	85
Example 17. Dissecting Vivaldi coloratura	86
Example 18. Sequences	87
Example 19. Harmonic conventions	88
Example 20. Reduction of harmonic function in measures 54-62	88

CHAPTER 1

The Rediscovery of Vivaldi

To begin an examination of a singular piece of Vivaldi's sacred vocal music, we must first understand how that whole sphere of his compositions evolved and came to light. By twenty-first century standards, it is difficult to imagine a musical world that is not familiar with the wealth of music which Antonio Vivaldi poured out over his lifetime. However, the interest in and rediscovery of his entire *oeuvre* is actually relatively new. Prior to the Second World War, Vivaldi's name was mostly associated with merely one or two of his concertos. This eighteenth-century composer had to wait until the twentieth century before the immense scope of his instrumental music would be fully realized, and the broad spectrum of his sacred works, operas, and oratorios would come back to the light of day at all. Until such time, the Venetian composer's place in musical history and importance would flounder, based solely on a few violin concertos and arrangements. Following his death in 1741, the next significant mention of Vivaldi's name would not appear until around 1802, when some of his concertos were newly published.

The Bach scholar Nikolaus Forkel claimed that these concertos had served as critical guidance to Johann Sebastian's own training in composition. Karl Heller describes the effect this had on Vivaldi's reputation in the years following:

Until the late nineteenth century, interest in Vivaldi had been almost entirely from the historic viewpoint and largely one-sided in the sense that he was seen in relation to Johann Sebastian Bach. As a result, German musicologists were the first and for a long time the most intensive students of Vivaldi. The connection also explains why nineteenth-century Vivaldi studies revolved around Bach. Vivaldi's musical style was usually measured against Bach's art, which had been raised to the universal standard for 'old music'; therefore Vivaldi's music was judged negatively. The distinctive qualities of his music, so different from those

of Bach's, were no more recognized than the specific values of, say, Telemann's works.¹

The first significant step to reevaluate Vivaldi and separate him from the image of a composer who merely failed to meet Bach's standards was taken in 1867 by Julius Rühlman, a Dresden-based musician who wrote an essay detailing the discovery of dozens of original Vivaldi manuscripts in a cabinet of the Catholic Hofkirche in Dresden. Uncovered in 1860, they had lain undisturbed for at least a hundred years. In his essay, Rühlman became the first person to seriously study important elements of Vivaldi's style and describe them in positive terms, thus beginning a move towards understanding the Italianate style and separating Vivaldi from Bach's shadow.

In the early twentieth century, German musicologist Arnold Schering made a more in-depth study of Vivaldi's then-extant music in his 1905 history of the instrumental concerto, *Geschichte des Instrumentalkonzerts bis auf die Gegenwart*. In this writing Schering "demonstrated the composer's penchant for experimentation by presenting an abundance of examples: new thematic elements and formal structures, performance techniques, and timbres. He repeatedly emphasized the resulting musical richness."² This was a step forward in Vivaldi's artistic and historical importance. Schering declared him to be "as exemplary for the shaping of the violin concerto as Corelli was for that of the sonata."³

However, there was still little emphasis on any of Vivaldi's forms other than instrumental music. Vivaldi expert Michael Talbot offers numerous reasons why no other

¹ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice*, trans. David Marinelli (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ Arnold Schering, in Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi* (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1995), 8.

forms had yet been sought out: “The one-sided emphasis on instrumental music reflected, first, the availability and convenience of the material for study and performance; second, the common belief of the time... that instrumental music, being wordless, was purer, more autonomous and in a sense more ‘spiritual’ than that bearing a text; third, the assumption, taken over from the natural sciences, that what was historically more progressive (as measured by its influence) was artistically more valuable.”⁴

The largest step toward rediscovery of Vivaldi’s sacred and dramatic works, and indeed his entire body of work, came in the short period between 1927 and 1930 with the acquisition of the Foà and the Giordano Collections by the Biblioteca Nazionale of Turin, Italy. The monumental depth and size of these two collections instantly opened the doors to the immensity of Vivaldi’s compositional output. The genesis of these discoveries and their combined acquisitions is truly an amazing story.

Remarkably, the entire content of the two collections is traced to one single family, headed by Genoese count Giacomo Durazzo (1717-1794). This former superintendent of the Viennese imperial court theater had purchased the manuscripts which comprise these incredible collections from Venetian collector Jacopo Soranzo during the count’s tenure as Austria’s imperial ambassador to Venice sometime between 1764 and 1794. Author Karl Heller speculates that Soranzo had, in turn, purchased the pages directly from Vivaldi’s family.⁵ The complete collection came to Giacomo’s descendant Giuseppe Maria Durazzo, who subsequently divided it among his two sons, Marcello and Flavio Ignazio. Marcello’s inheritance was acquired by the college of San Carlo in Borgo San Martino (Monferrato), Italy. According to Michael Talbot, some

⁴ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 8-9.

⁵ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi*, 18.

booksellers had expressed interest in purchasing the musical scores from the college, so the rector approached Luigi Torri, the director of the Turin Library, for assistance in valuating them. Aiding Torri in the inspection was Alberto Gentili, a music historian from the University of Turin. What they found were fourteen large volumes of manuscripts, most of which were clearly identifiable as Vivaldi's work. Four volumes were dedicated to concertos, seven to operas, two to cantatas, and one to sacred works. It is this one volume of sacred compositions to which the RV 608 *Nisi Dominus* belongs. "The value and intrinsic interest of the collection made it imperative to preserve intact, which could most suitably be done by acquiring it for the Biblioteca Nazionale itself. Since public funds were insufficient, a private purchaser-cum-donor was found. This was a Turinese banker, Roberto Foà, who named the collection after his late son Mauro. On 15 February 1927 the manuscripts were bought, and on the following 23 May the donation was officially acknowledged."⁶ Because of the gaps in the numbering systems of the concerto and opera volumes, it was immediately apparent to Torri and Gentili that these fourteen volumes which they had acquired represented only part of the whole collection. Working back through the Durazzo family tree, they discovered Marcello's brother Flavio Ignazio and correctly assumed that the missing volumes were in the possession of his son, also named Giuseppe Maria Durazzo. After long and arduous negotiations, Giuseppe agreed to sell his holdings. H. C. Robbins Landon also claims that Giuseppe had to be coerced by his own parish priest to even allow examination of his library, having been so enraged that the monks of Monferrato had sold their half of the music. Once he was finally persuaded to sell, Durazzo had, "stipulated that the music of this collection should never be published. There then ensued a huge legal battle which,

⁶ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 12.

fortunately, was lost by Durazzo.”⁷ The eventual purchase for the Biblioteca Nazionale was accomplished through a donation by a Turinese textile manufacturer named Filippo Giordano. Coincidentally, Giordano had also lost a young son, as Roberto Foà had, and named the collection in honor of that son, Renzo Giordano. “The purchase was effected on 30 April 1930; the official receipt of the donation by the state took place on 30 October 1930.”⁸ Thus the collection was completed, now comprising twenty-seven volumes, and closing all the numbering gaps of the various volumes.

In the years following, work was slow on disseminating the newly discovered music, either as published materials or public performances, for a number of reasons which are also of particular importance to the resurgence timeline of Vivaldi, especially his association with sacred music. First of all, both Giordano and Foà had imposed similar conditions on their donations, setting forth “a clause reserving for Gentili the right to be the first to study and publish the manuscripts.”⁹ However unfortunate, this is not an uncommon approach, but the “sheer quantity of music covered by the pre-emption, amounting to some 7,800 folios in the Vivaldi volumes alone, was beyond the capacity of a single individual to deal with single-handed.”¹⁰ Gentili was also conflicted between his duty as employee of the library to catalogue the works as quickly as possible and his granted contractual role as first editor of the music. “In the twelve years (1927-1938) during which Gentili held control over the manuscripts only five Vivaldi works, all

⁷ H.C. Robbins Landon, *Vivaldi: Voice of the Baroque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170.

⁸ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 14.

⁹ Alberto Gentili, in Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 14.

¹⁰ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 15.

concertos, were published.”¹¹ As Michael Talbot points out, this slow pace also reflects the limited interest in early music in pre-war Italy.

Composer Alfredo Casella would be the next person granted access to the collections in 1938, but only through intervention of the Italian minister of education, Giuseppe Bottai. Sadly, Gentili would have been unable to protest or even acquiesce to the request since he, a Jew, was made a non-person by the newly enacted racial laws. Casella sought access in order to mount a *Settimana Musicale*—a week of music devoted entirely to Vivaldi’s music—which he organized with the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy. Talbot calls this event, held from 16 to 21 September 1939, and its modern premieres of quintessential Vivaldian sacred works like the *Gloria*, *RV 589*, the *Credo*, *RV 591*, and the *Stabat Mater*, *RV 621*, “the absolute starting point of their modern revival.”¹² Casella himself edited, arranged, and secured publication of these three monumental sacred works. A fourth, the great oratorio *Juditha triumphans*, *RV 644*, was also published in an edition by Vito Frazzi, following its premiere during a second Music Week in Siena in 1941.

Though their publication represented strides towards progress in the dissemination of Vivaldi’s sacred works, the four pieces mentioned above began to solely symbolize the composer’s achievement in the genre. In a sense, the public taste was conceding these works as the greatest, therefore the only and they remained the almost exclusive works performed or printed. A multitude of sacred works unearthed with the Foà and Giordani Collections (including this paper’s highlighted work, the *Nisi Dominus*, *RV 608*) were being ignored, but why? Many speculations seem plausible. For starters,

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Ibid., 16.

Casella's already existing editions were heavily relied upon as a sufficient standard: "one performs what one knows—one knows what one has already heard in performance (or on the printed page)." ¹³ Significantly, a European continent at war certainly reduced the accessibility of the manuscripts in Turin for further scholarship and performance. However, one strong probability seems to have been that of the practical nature of the music and publishing business: royalties and fees. There emerges in this study a great difference between the function and importance of one who copies or transcribes the music for performance, and one who edits, arranges or revises for publication. The more an individual imbues the music with his own artistic choices or changes, different from the original source, "the easier it is to ensure the payment of royalties to publisher and editor!" ¹⁴ Even with increased accessibility to the music in the post-war years and the advent of the long-playing record, publication rate was significantly slower.

The reason was, and still is, that record companies like, wherever possible, to commission manuscript editions rather than use existing published editions, because the fees paid to the transcriber of the score and to subsequent copyists are much smaller than the royalties that would accrue to the publisher and editor of a printed source. For different reasons but with similar results, music festivals and other 'high-profile' events that set a premium on giving first performances tend to prepare their own material directly from the original sources, which means that the music once again remains in manuscript state. Consequently, the enormous enlargement, in recent times, of the concert-goer's and discophile's experience of this music has continually outpaced the ability of the ordinary conductor, choir and singer (and to some extent, also the student) to get hold of the notes. ¹⁵

One of the most significant steps toward furthering Vivaldi's music came with the formation of the Instituto Italiano Antonio Vivaldi in 1947 by Antonio Fanna, Angelo Ephrikian, and Gian Francesco Malipiero. This institute led to a boon in recording, concertizing, publishing, and ultimately interest in Vivaldi. Ephrikian led the way in

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

making new recordings, finally showing some independence of the Casella scores, and he directed the L'Orchestra della Scuola Veneziana which gave modern premieres of numerous sacred works of Vivaldi and led to “the process of exploring Vivaldi’s sacred music in its totality.”¹⁶

Also in 1947, Italian publisher Ricordi began to bring out the collected instrumental works on behalf of the Institute. However, the publication of vocal, sacred, and dramatic works was still slow. It was not until 1959 that another hallmark of Vivaldi’s sacred music was published: Malipiero’s edition of the *Magnificat*, *RV 610*. Notably in 1960, the *Nisi Dominus*, *RV 608* was edited by Massimo Bruni and published by Carisch. In the late 1960s and early 1970s selected solo motets and choral works were also published, but it was not until 1984 that Ricordi undertook the task of publishing the remaining complete and authentic sacred compositions. With this accomplished, “...one can at last say that virtually the complete extant corpus of Vivaldi’s sacred vocal music is now freely available for performance and study, sometimes in more than one adequate edition.”¹⁷

Study and research on Vivaldi’s life, works, and contemporary musical life has been the last realm of this composer to be explored and broadened. Aside of program notes and articles on specific pieces or collections from the likes of Casella, Gentili and others, there was a paucity of large-scale studies until the 1940s. French musicologist Marc Pincherle published one of the first monumental studies in 1948, *Antonio Vivaldi et la musique instrumentale* and it was soon translated into English as *Vivaldi: Genius of the Baroque*. This work, called “a beautifully written work of massive erudition which had

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

been in gestation (if one discounts a few articles which appeared on the way) for some 40 years”¹⁸ also contained a thematic catalogue of the instrumental compositions which remained the standard designation for decades. More recently, Danish scholar Peter Ryom’s catalogue and numbering system, RV (*Ryom Verzeichnis*), has passed into general circulation due to its “comprehensiveness, accuracy, and rationality of organization.”¹⁹ Irish musicologist Paul Everett has contributed much about paper-types and rastrography (the study of the layout of staves in a manuscript), which has aided in authenticating and dating many works. Additionally, scholars H.C. Robbins Landon, Walter Kolneder, and Karl Heller have all contributed significantly to the biographical and contextual studies of Vivaldi and his Venice. But possibly most important and far-reaching is the scope of research compiled by British musicologist Michael Talbot, to whom this author is extremely indebted. Talbot has written dozens of articles, books, and critical notes about Vivaldi and his compositions, not to mention editing and bringing to publication dozens of musical works, thereby offering the modern researcher an open door to Vivaldi’s life, compositional style, and his musical context in eighteenth-century Venice.

At its close the twentieth century has yielded some of the greatest treasures and advancements in the study and perception of this remarkable eighteenth-century composer. The milestones of such voluminous score discoveries like the Foà and Giordano collections, the path to more complete publishing of all musical forms represented by the composer, the far-reaching impact of hundreds of popular recordings, increased and specialized concert programming and the vast new developments in

¹⁸ Michael Talbot, *Vivaldi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

scholarly research on Antonio Vivaldi have elevated his name—and more importantly his music—to remarkable prominence. Indeed one can even safely concede that Antonio Vivaldi has become nearly a household name, a ubiquitous symbol of the Baroque era, if not all of classical music, after spending nearly two centuries in near oblivion.

CHAPTER 2

The Red Priest

To begin the study of his music, one must understand the man. It is also uniquely relative to this paper's discussion, whose topic is a work of sacred vocal music, that we examine the life of Antonio Vivaldi not only as composer, but also as a member of the clergy, so as to assist in the examination of the score itself. The way he was known in his own time even links the personal with the professional: by virtue of his red hair—which he apparently inherited from his father—he was often called *Il Prete Rosso* (the red priest).

Numerous early sources have conjectured that the noted thirteenth-century Genoese seafaring Vivaldi brothers were related to the musical Antonio Vivaldi of Venice. The connection is slightly romanticized but a rather fitting image to equate the often tempestuous nature of the composer's string writing to the surge of the mighty seas, which he so often depicted in concerto or operatic form. But evidence confirms that his family was from Brescia, in the northern Italian region of Lombardy. This evidence came in 1963 through the research of the English scholar Eric Paul (though named as Emil Paul by Kolneder and his translators) when at last he uncovered Vivaldi's baptismal record in Venice at the church of San Giovanni in Bràgora. The document lists not only his baptism but also the date of his birth and his family origins. Vivaldi in fact had *two* baptisms; the certificate marks the official date at church but also mentions that he was baptized at home on the day of his birth, 4 March 1678, due to the fact that he was in danger of death (*per pericolo di morte*). One of Vivaldi's biographers, Remo Giazotto, claimed that fear following the earth tremor on that day in Venice "was the probable

cause for the emergency christening.”²⁰ In fact it is more widely accepted that the chest condition which plagued him most of his life (and about which the composer himself actually wrote) was the actual cause. H.C. Robbins Landon offers an interesting twist, saying, “The parents had been married on 6 August 1677, hence Antonio was either a premature child or conceived before wedlock: if premature, that may explain his sickly state at birth and later in life.”²¹ Curiously, the date of his parents’ marriage is inconsistent through a multitude of biographical literature, even among different tomes by the same authors.

Also listed on Antonio’s baptismal record was the profession of his father, Giovanni Battista, as an instrumentalist. This is indeed significant because of the high probability that he was his son’s first and most influential instructor on the violin. It has also been speculated by numerous researchers that the “honoured composer of operas and sacred music, Giovanni Legrenzi”²² may have been instructor to the junior Vivaldi. Antonio would surely have come in contact with Legrenzi, as he was the *maestro di cappella* at the ducal chapel of San Marco, where the elder Vivaldi was employed as a violinist in the orchestra. Giovanni Battista’s place in this orchestra was also significant to Antonio’s future musical career, “since he was now brought into contact with the milieu of this illustrious musical group.”²³ Giovanni, who was listed not by his surname but by ‘Rossi’ by virtue of his red hair, also rose to prominence among the Venetian instrumentalists of the time. So much so that “he was later taken on as a ‘master of

²⁰ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice*, trans. David Marinelli (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997), 39.

²¹ H. C. Robbins Landon, *Vivaldi: Voice of the Baroque* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc, 1993), 15.

²² Walter Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work*, trans. Bill Hopkins (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 7.

²³ Walter Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: Documents of his Life and Works*, trans. Kurt Michaelis (New York: Heinrichshofen Edition, 1982), 25.

instruments' at the Ospedale dei Mendicanti in 1689 before being cited along with his son among the eminent Venetian violinists listed in the *Guida de'Forestieri* of 1713.”²⁴

Little is actually documented concerning Antonio Vivaldi's early years or formal musical training, although both Kolneder and Landon offer the likelihood that he was also a member of the San Marco orchestra, “even deputizing for his father when Giovanni Battista was absent from Venice during the years 1689-92.”²⁵ This is likely taken from the Venetian historian Francesco Caffi, but the church records do not list Antonio formally. The next records of Antonio were concerning his entry into the process of Holy Orders, that is, the priesthood. One may suppose that this career combination would be either relatively rare or very difficult to balance, but indeed there is much evidence to the contrary. “Priest-composers were no novelty in Venice during Vivaldi's lifetime. Nor were priest-violinists. It was Vivaldi's threefold status as a priest-violinist-composer that placed him in a special category not just in Venice but actually in the whole of Italy.”²⁶ There remains to this day a tradition within the mainstream of Catholic musical repertoire of the ordained person (men and women) as both composer and servant of the church, e.g. Jan Michael Joncas, Cyprian Consiglio, Suzanne Toolan, Ricky Manalo, Chrysogonus Waddell, and many others.

The unique question to ponder is the decision or motivation to join the clergy at all. Some studies indicate that in Vivaldi's Venice as many as one in twenty adults was a priest or a nun.²⁷ An important observation is made by an anonymous essay published in Naples in 1756: “It is customary among those [Italian] artisans who have a large family

²⁴ Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi's Venice: Music and celebration in the baroque era*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: Souvenir Press Ltd, 2003), 9.

²⁵ Landon, *Vivaldi: Voice of the Baroque*, 16.

²⁶ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 29.

²⁷ Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi's Venice*, 83.

to earmark one of their children right from birth for the priesthood in order to enjoy various privileges connected with that state.”²⁸ Vivaldi was certainly of the artisan class and, being the eldest son, possibly felt a responsibility to help his family through this status connection. But what rights or entitlements could the rank of a priest bring to the rest of the Vivaldi clan? “Those privileges would include the exercise of a non-manual profession (in itself a sign of status), security of employment and the possibility of upward mobility. In addition, the forcing into celibacy of a son would reduce the number of grandchildren and thus help to prevent dispersal of the family wealth.”²⁹ Sources are again inconsistent, but suggest that Vivaldi had as many as nine siblings. “In compensation, a candidate for the priesthood would expect to acquire, in the course of his training, knowledge and skills of both a general and a specific nature that could later find application outside as well as inside his profession and which could be used for the benefit of his kinsfolk.”³⁰ This would of course accurately describe our composer’s situation, for as his talents grew and emerged onto the musical world, so his fame would grow along with the possibility of more financial security.

Each stage of Vivaldi’s progress through the four minor orders and the three major are well documented, from his tonsure on 18 September 1693 to his priestly ordination on 24 March 1703. It was during this period of preparation for the priesthood that one of his first known public demonstrations of his musical abilities was documented. For Christmas Masses of 1696, he was hired as an additional player for the orchestra of San Marco. The normal course of action for a candidate for the priesthood would be to enter a seminary for the necessary training and study required. Vivaldi,

²⁸ Anonymous, in Talbot, Michael, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 45.

²⁹ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 45

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 45-46.

however, not being of a high social class and therefore not likely to gain admittance to the patriarchal seminary of San Cipriano di Murano or to the ducal Seminario Gregoriano, took a third route. Pope Sixtus V had granted Venice a special concession during his reign in the late 1500s due to a shortage of clergy in that city. This provided for training to be done in service to a particular church, as an apprenticeship of sorts. This would certainly have suited Vivaldi's parallel training in music, and in fact, there remain some murky details about his studies and travels at this time. Vivaldi expert Michael Talbot even suggests that, though eligible for ordination any time after March of 1702, Vivaldi did not receive the Holy Orders until 1703 because he was absent from Venice on the three possible days of 1702 ordinations. He offers evidence that Antonio and his father were in Turin, where the Somis family, renowned for their training of eminent violinists, lived. "What Giovanni Battista and Antonio were doing in Turin is not explained, but it seems improbable that they were specially recruited from so far away merely for a church festival or to play in the orchestra of the Teatro Regio. The hypothesis of a period of study by Antonio makes better sense."³¹ If such a speculation is true, this would not be the last time that Vivaldi's musical aims conflicted with, or superseded, his religious duties. The next chapter shall further discuss where both careers took the composer at the onset of his official public life as a newly-ordained priest and professional musician.

Here the association must be made for the relevance of Vivaldi as both priest and musician. This is especially pertinent to the ensuing examination of this paper's topic of his sacred vocal composition, *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608. First of all, the general level of education which the priesthood offered him—and any man of his relatively lower social

³¹ Ibid., 50.

status—was certainly a benefit that might not have been attainable otherwise. Although Vivaldi is not particularly known for any greatness of poetic style or exemplary setting of text, his many amendments to cantata texts and later dealings with opera librettos would have certainly required an elevated acquaintance with language and literature, for example. Most importantly, however, would be his connection to pre-established texts; those of the *Liber Usualis* or missal mostly, which would be the basis of so many of his great choral and solo works.

During his training Vivaldi will have learned the plainsong repertoire (which cannot have left his melodic sensibility unaffected) and familiarized himself thoroughly with the full range of liturgical texts. As a matter of course, he will also have learned, and passed tests in, Latin. This intimate knowledge of the liturgy brought certain benefits to him when he came to set it to music. It is not that he had privileged access to these texts (which can be found in any breviary or missal), nor that he had a better understanding of them than a lay person. It is rather that they were so much a part of his life that he felt able to treat them with unusual freedom, intercalating and troping fragments in a way that a non-priest might have considered too disrespectful.³²

Furthermore, his status as a member of the clergy could also have assisted his image or reputation as a composer of church music. Within the norms of eighteenth-century Venetian music, only singers or organists were charged with the composition of sacred music; and Vivaldi, as a violinist, did not fall into either category. Michael Talbot poses the question of whether or not one should consider the possibility that Vivaldi's priesthood somehow 'spiritualized' his music, but indeed many transcendent notes have flown from the pen of the layman. (Talbot rightly and specifically points to J.S. Bach). Nevertheless, he summates: "However, it seems reasonable to suppose that Vivaldi derived great personal satisfaction from combining and reconciling the two most important elements of his background, which to the world could appear so disparate,

³² Ibid., 56.

through this composition of music for the church. In that sense, his *musica sacra* was an integrative force that held the potential for great achievement.”³³

To examine this more closely and highlight the details of this paper’s chosen topic, one must next look to the peculiar Venetian institution which would be the catalyst of so much of Vivaldi’s sacred music and with which he would be forever linked—the Venetian *Ospedali*—specifically the *Ospedale della Pietà*.

³³ Ibid., 56.

CHAPTER 3

The Ospedali Grandi and Vivaldi

Having been ordained a priest in March of 1703, the next significant step in the life of Antonio Vivaldi followed shortly thereafter, in September of the same year, when he began his association with the Ospedale della Pietà. This association, which would last nearly forty years (albeit including interruptions), is significant not only to the life and musical productivity of our composer, but also to the social and musical history of Venice. In order to examine the importance of this relationship, we must first attempt to understand the specifics of these institutions themselves.

The Italian word *ospedale* begs the immediate, and almost obvious, relationship to the English ‘hospital’, and indeed that *is* an acceptable modern linguistic translation, but it soon becomes clear that this is not necessarily the most adequate descriptor of these institutions, nor is it entirely incorrect. In exploration of this subject one can expect to find a slew of words used to delineate exactly what these places did or how they functioned, e.g. boarding school, orphanage, convent, conservatory, asylum, hospital, or hospice. “In olden times Venice was a city of maritime commerce and for centuries, by virtue of firmly established bonds, had had the run of trade with the Orient, and consequently repeatedly found itself involved in severe conflicts, especially with the Turks. In such a city there was an abundance of orphans, foundlings, illegitimates and similarly needy folk. To take care of them, orphanages had been set up already in the fourteenth century, to which were attached infirmaries, hence the description ‘Ospedale’.”³⁴ Among all such institutions in Venice there are four known as the grand

³⁴ Walter Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work*, trans. Bill Hopkins (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 10.

ones (*ospedale grandi*) due to the fact that they have been recognized as “four of the most prominent cultural foundations or comprehensive charitable institutions for the unique civilization of Venice after its decline as a dominant world power.”³⁵ These *ospedali* were the Mendicanti, Pietà, Incurabili, and Derelitti (later and more widely known as Ospedaletto, probably due to its status as the smallest). These were all created for charitable and/or medical purposes but eventually came to fame and prominence through the astounding musical virtuosity exhibited by their inhabitants.

The oldest of these was the Ospedale di San Lazzaro e dei Mendicanti, founded around 1182. In Latin, *mendicare* means ‘to beg’ and so naturally this was an institution that took in beggars and street children. But like any active and thriving organization, its aims developed and changed over time. “In the thirteenth century it became the first leper colony in history, and was reorganized towards the close of the sixteenth century into a post-Tridentine welfare foundation.”³⁶ This was the second largest in population among the Venetian *ospedali*, serving somewhere between six hundred and nine hundred, even though it exercised a strict admissions policy because “its ‘pool’ of potential residents was large.”³⁷ The Ospedale degli Incurabili, founded in 1522, was so named because it was created “by a group of nobles anxious to contain (and as far as possible treat) the ‘incurable’ disease *par excellence*, syphilis. It later broadened its scope to admit the sick of all kinds, reformed prostitutes, male orphans and 70 girls from noble and citizen families. Its total population remained around 500.”³⁸ The smallest and youngest of the four famed institutions was the Ospedale di Santa Maria dei Derelitti ai Santi Giovanni e

³⁵ Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice: Musical Foundations 1525-1855*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 94.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Paolo, begun in 1528 and later known as the Ospedaletto. Its inaugural aims are specified as “a collection point for street children”³⁹ by researcher Jane Baldauf-Berdes, but Talbot claims that it “owed its origins to a famine that drove large numbers of people from the *terraferma* to seek relief in Venice.”⁴⁰ Its population by the eighteenth century numbered 200 or less.

The largest, and, as stated above, most applicable to our discussion, was the Ospedale della Pietà, which was founded in 1336. “Its residents, apart from a small number of female boarders from the nobility and citizenry who were allowed to take advantage of its educational facilities, consisted entirely of foundlings: that is, new-born children deposited by their parents anonymously in a niche on its outside wall.”⁴¹ Unlike some of the other *ospedali*, the Pietà accepted all infants without question or condition and set no cap on the number which could be accepted. “From its beginning, the work of the Pietà had been carried on by women belonging to a sodality, called the Consorelle di Santa Maria dell’Umiltà, or Celestia, that originated in 1313... The state assumed jurisdiction over the Pietà in 1353, and the Major Council simultaneously created the post of prioress to be filled by a member of the women’s sodality.”⁴² (Sodality is defined as a lay society for religious and charitable purposes). These women continued to act as the administrators of the Ospedale della Pietà until 1605, when a forty-member governing board assumed its leadership. This board was made up entirely of noblemen from the city of Venice.

³⁹ Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 2.

⁴⁰ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 94.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴² Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 47.

The generalization that all of these institutions catered exclusively to females appears in many places. A second thought only has to be given to the terms for which the various *ospedali* were created to realize that, naturally, the sick, homeless, and abandoned could not possibly pertain to females alone. Although some altered their admissions qualifications over the years, they all—except the Pietà—at one point or another saw males among their populations. “For the male wards of the *ospedali*, the stay was only temporary, since on reaching adolescence they were placed in apprenticeships and thereupon ceased to be a charge on the institution.”⁴³ However, the female residents would make the lasting impact on the musical fame since they were allowed to stay much longer, or indefinitely.

It was unthinkable to expose them to the dangers of the outside world before they were fully adult, and in any case they needed a dowry from the institution in order to marry or take the veil. This dowry had to be earned, morally and materially, through work for the institution itself. Each *ospedale* had workshops in which such appropriate crafts as lace-making were practised, and the ordinary female residents, called *figlie di comun* or *figlie di casa*, were obliged to produce goods of a given value. The individual annual quota was called the *tasca*. Full or partial exemption from the *tasca* was a privilege eagerly sought. One way to gain it was to become a *figlia di coro*.⁴⁴

Here one begins to unravel some evidence as to why such importance was placed on the musical life and training of the girls. (It should also be stated that the term *coro* is used to refer not only to the singers of the musical ensemble, but also the players. It is treated as one musical entity). “Members of the *cori* received increased training, exemptions from manual work, privileges, dowries, financial rewards, and retirement benefits for prescribed work as church musicians.”⁴⁵ In return, the *cori* provided the institutions with a very necessary function: that of making money. The *ospedali* increasingly had to

⁴³ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 94.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁵ Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 3.

generate funding for themselves. Their residents, who had once been considered wards of the state, were now finding themselves affected by the waning economy of La Serenissima, as Venice was called. “The custom of performing music in public on Saturdays, on Sundays, and on holidays was an important early form of public concert life in Italy and, not incidentally, brought in a good deal of money for the financing of the *ospedali*.”⁴⁶ But public concerts were not the only source of income. Jane Baldauf-Berdes illuminates some of the ‘broader currents’ of Italian social and musical history which gave rise to the elevated importance of the *cori*:

Another current flows from the fact that the financing of Venetian welfare relied on legacies from testators, most notably those from testators who died without survivors to pray for them. The *cori* played a dual role in this arrangement. First of all, their performances attracted benefactors. For Venetians, to whom church-going was a free and frequent activity, the experience was valued for the homily, the holiness or believability portrayed by the celebrant, and the quality of the music. The leaders of the *ospedali* spent generously to ensure that the components of their institutions’ liturgical life were appropriate and well performed. Word spread about spectacular celebrations at the churches annexed to the *ospedali*. Thus was created the second role for the musicians of the *cori*, whose works also rewarded benefactors, especially through fulfillment of the terms for Mass stipends laid down in testator wills.⁴⁷

Concurrently, as the importance and quality of training continued to increase, (along with the number of residents) so did the instructional nature of the *figlie* themselves—almost becoming self-sufficient. After being chosen for the *coro* at age eight or nine, a girl would receive musical training from older members and external *maestri*.

Eventually she graduated to the ‘active’ section of the *coro* that performed at services. At the age of 24 she would have the chance to become a *sottomaestra*, at 30 a *maestra*. At the head of the *coro* stood two *maestre di coro*, one for each division. These were responsible not only for the musical direction of the *coro* in the absence of the *maestro di coro* but also for the maintenance of good discipline. In one sense, they stood above the *maestro di coro* himself, for every six months they had to list for the governors what new compositions he had

⁴⁶ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice*, 27.

⁴⁷ Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 10.

supplied. At the age of 40 a member of the *coro* might be allowed to retire, though several stayed on until they were much older.⁴⁸

Competition among the Venetian *ospedali grandi* to produce the best and most admired music was obviously one of the reasons why the level of achievement rose so high by the eighteenth century. At the recommendation of the musical director (*maestro di coro*), Francesco Gasparini, the governors decided to increase the level of musical training and quality of performance at the Ospedale della Pietà in August of 1703. This created a musical opportunity for the newly-ordained Antonio Vivaldi. “As a result of Gasparini’s proposal to employ new viola, violin, and oboe teachers, Vivaldi was appointed *maestro di violino*. His annual salary for the post was sixty ducats—fully four times more than his father’s beginning salary as violinist in the Cappella Ducale. Vivaldi was not hired indefinitely; the *congregazione*, the institution’s governing board, had to vote annually on his appointment just as it did for the other teaching posts at the Pietà.”⁴⁹ This condition is one of the reasons why, over the period of his thirty-five-year association with the Pietà, we see gaps in his official employment. “In 1709, for the first time, Vivaldi’s employment at the Ospedale della Pietà was interrupted because he had not received the two-thirds majority vote, required since 1708, for continued employment.”⁵⁰ Concurrent with his duties as *maestro di violino*, “he was assigned two successive *mansionerie*: the first (from September 1703 to August 1705) in memory of Lucrezia Trevisan Memmo and the second (from September 1705 to November 1706) for Tomaso Gritti. These Masses brought in 80 ducats—a third as much again as his salary as

⁴⁸ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 96.

⁴⁹ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice*, 42-43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

violin teacher.”⁵¹ This role of *mansionario* required him to say mass daily on behalf of the particular benefactors, who provided the money for the lucrative additional salary. However, “Vivaldi was paid only half the twenty ducats that he should have received between June and August 1705 because he read only forty-five of the ninety stipulated masses.”⁵² The reason for this could have been his health. In a famous letter to his patron Guido Bentivoglio d’Aragona in 1737, Vivaldi confesses that he had not said Mass for many years because of the illness which afflicted him since birth. Following his ordination he said Mass ‘for a year or a little more’ and then ceased. In this letter he called the ailment *strettezza di petto*, which means ‘tightness in the chest’ and most likely refers to asthma. Other anecdotes abound regarding Vivaldi leaving the altar during Mass to adjourn to the sacristy to write down music that had just entered his head, but it is more likely that the chest condition was the cause for that as well. We cannot know for certain what the exact date was when Vivaldi stopped saying Mass, but the relinquishment of such a significant source of additional income must speak to the compelling nature of his illness. Nevertheless, his career as a musician and composer was burgeoning.

Over the years of his employment at the Ospedale della Pietà, Vivaldi’s role changed and expanded. The specifics of his duties certainly had a great impact upon the types of music he composed, and when. His activity is described thus: “1. as a violin teacher from 1 September 1703 to 1709; 2. as a teacher of the *viola all’inglese* from 17 August 1704 into 1709; 3. as *maestro de’ concerti* from 27 September 1711 to 29 March 1716 and 24 May 1716 to 1717; 4. as an external supplier of instrumental music from 2

⁵¹ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 50.

⁵² Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice*, 43.

July 1723 to 1729, and 5. as *maestro de' concerti* from 5 August 1735 to 1738.”⁵³ The composition of instrumental music was the task of the *maestro de' concerti*. The composition of sacred vocal music belonged to the *maestro di coro*, a title which Vivaldi never had. So why then do we have this wealth of *musica sacra* from the composer?

Whereas Vivaldi turned out concertos and, from middle age onwards, operas with a considerable degree of continuity, the bulk, at least, of his sacred vocal music was composed during widely separated bursts of activity. This was because, unlike in the other two spheres, in which, so to speak, he could create his own market through his personal initiative, Vivaldi had to compose sacred vocal music strictly to order. The provision of music for a *cappella* was in normal circumstances the prerogative, indeed the contractual duty, of its appointed *maestro*. Since he never held such a post, Vivaldi was called upon to supply church music only exceptionally: for example, during an interregnum between two *maestri* or at the request of a church's patron.⁵⁴

Such information is helpful not only in dating works of music, but also in deriving their initial purposes or for whom they were composed. Based on records kept at the Pietà, we know that the first of two such interregna can be defined as April of 1713 to February 1719, between the time when Gasparini departed and a successor, named Carlo Pietro Grúa arrived to take over the post of *maestro di coro*. During this time, “both Vivaldi, the *maestro di violino*, and the newly appointed singing master Pietro Scarpari were pressed into service as composers of sacred vocal music; on 2 June 1715 Vivaldi even received the annual bonus of fifty ducats paid to the *maestro di coro* for a series of compositions described as ‘a complete Mass, a Vespers, an oratorio, over thirty motets and other labours’.”⁵⁵ One may ask why, over such a lengthy period, the governing board of the Pietà neither replaced Gasparini, nor elevated Vivaldi, who was providing them with much praiseworthy music, to the post of *maestro di coro*? Considering the curious details

⁵³ Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 199.

⁵⁴ Michael Talbot, *Vivaldi's Sacred Vocal Music*, Venetian Music in the Age of Vivaldi, Variorum Collected Studies Series: CS661, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 761.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 761.

surrounding Gasparini's departure this is indeed an alluring question. In April of 1713 the governors granted Gasparini a leave of approximately six months to attend to family matters and recover from ill health. He was not to receive his salary during that time but was still required to furnish the *ospedale* with new compositions. Not only did he not provide the music, but he never returned to his post. For unknown reasons, he completely severed his ties with Venice and ended up settling in Rome for the remaining years of his life. Talbot surmises that money was plainly the issue at hand: "by unofficially co-opting Vivaldi as 'house composer' for as long as he was willing and able to do their bidding, they were able to enjoy the best of both worlds: the secured a regular flow of new sacred works written by a celebrity long associated with the institution in the public mind...and they also saved 200 ducats on their salaries bill."⁵⁶ Their luck ran out when Vivaldi left Venice for Mantua in late 1717 "to take up a position as *maestro di cappella da camera* to Prince Philip of Hesse-Darmstadt, the city's governor on behalf of the Habsburgs. This was a 'secular' post entailing no responsibility for sacred music. We do not know whether Vivaldi resided continuously in Mantua or moved constantly between there and Venice. But even if he rarely set foot again in Venice before his definitive return in 1720, he will have been able, through the mails or with his father acting as intermediary, to maintain links with his native city."⁵⁷

Talbot breaks down Vivaldi's sacred music into three style periods, the first of which is confined to the time between Gasparini's departure in 1713 and Vivaldi's move to Mantua in late 1717. This early period, while he was the unofficial *maestro di coro*, proved the most prolific and is naturally closely allied to his employment with the Pietà.

⁵⁶ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 152.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

During this time he composed about thirty sacred vocal works, including three oratorios and the *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608. The second period is delineated from 1720 to 1735 and is an era of the composer's life which is mostly associated with travel and the composition of operas. Although he did produce a number of sacred vocal works during this time, they are largely unrelated to the Pietà. "Between 1720 and 1735 he had less occasion than formerly to compose sacred works and it is doubtful whether at any point he recaptured the frenetic tempo of the period 1713-1717. However, his increased opportunity, under the new conditions, to recycle his compositions was matched by a greater care to add manuscripts of them to his working collection, which is perhaps why they today appear—probably deceptively—to be about as numerous as the works of the first period."⁵⁸

Vivaldi traveled to many Italian cities during this time, including Rome, Mantua, Milan, and Florence. In July 1723 another engagement appears with the Ospedale della Pietà, when "the governors passed a motion...stipulating merely that Vivaldi was to produce two concertos per month (for the stipend of one sequin each). Although the 'honorable Don Antonio Vivaldi' was required, when in Venice, to conduct three to four rehearsals for each work, no mandatory presence was called for."⁵⁹ As Karl Heller states, there are a number of reasons which make this agreement significant to Vivaldi's standing in music history:

First, it manifested the musician's high prestige—of which the board of the Pietà was well aware—and it showed that the institution was willing to employ him under special conditions. Second, the resolution made clear that Vivaldi considered the *maestro* position at the Pietà a secondary post that did not hamper his freedom of movement for outside enterprises. Vivaldi used his increased freedom to pursue his opera projects, as well as for the fulfillment of composition commissions that came from leading public figures and institutions and from foreign or domestic aristocrats or other wealthy music lovers. These commissions

⁵⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁹ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi*, 138.

are also a yardstick for the fame and market value the musician enjoyed during these years, when he was at the height of his recognition as an artist.⁶⁰

His last period marks a return to association with the Pietà when he was officially re-employed in 1735 as *maestro de' concerti*, and a decline in his prominence and prestige as a composer. "His duties consisted of supplying the Pietà with 'concertos and compositions for all types of instruments' and of being available 'as frequently as necessary' to teach the girls and rehearse works."⁶¹ Obviously the governors were taking a harder line in regard to his travels at this point. Yet again it fell to Vivaldi to supply sacred vocal works during an interregnum of *maestri di coro*. Giovanni Porta departed in September 1737 and the post was not filled until August 1739 when Gennaro D'Allessandro was appointed. Vivaldi, though he had once again failed to receive the necessary majority of votes in continuing his appointment as *maestro de' concerti* in 1738, was still called upon to supply music during this time. Most notable among this smaller group of sacred vocal works is the newly identified setting of the same psalm as the G minor *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608, another *Nisi Dominus*, RV 803 in A Major, found in Dresden, and finally published in 2003.

It is interesting that these four institutions, the *ospedali grandi*, which started off as orphanages or places of refuge for the poor and infirmed, became the antecedents of the greatest schools of music. They and four very similar organizations in Naples eventually became the archetype of training and performing excellence for the rest of the world. "Their new ambition was to preserve, transmit and perfect musical tradition, and the verb *conservare*, to keep, led for the first time in Europe to this word 'conservatoire'"

⁶⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁶¹ Ibid., 253.

which has never left us since then.”⁶² The conservatories of Naples produced some of the greatest *castrati*, singers of exorbitant fame and wealth in the time of Handel and Vivaldi. In order to understand more fully the nature and function of these *ospedali grandi*, and their influence in Vivaldi’s *oeuvre* of sacred vocal music, we must also consider the context of the city which initiated and fostered them: the most serene Republic of Venice. As we shall see, it was as unique and fascinating to foreigners, scholars and musicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as it remains in the twenty-first century. It was also closely linked to Antonio Vivaldi, possibly even more so than one would unite Mozart with Salzburg or Bach with Leipzig.

⁶² Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, trans. Margaret Crosland, (London: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1996), 37.

CHAPTER 4

La Serenissima

“The composer of *The Four Seasons* is certainly a somewhat rare example of total fusion between a city, a man and his work. In the first place, because he was born there and spent his life there, with the exception of the sad, painful attempt to move to Vienna during the last months of his existence. Also, and especially, because everything in his instrumental and vocal work reflects the cheerful style, the colours, sometimes sparkling, sometimes misty, the liquid, transparent atmosphere of Venice, Vivaldi and Venice make one together.”⁶³ Indeed the study of Antonio Vivaldi and his music is inextricably linked to the culture, life, and history of the most serene republic of Venice.

Particularly noteworthy is the part which music played in the establishment of the city as one of the world’s first tourist attractions. Though the modern tourist has come to expect the songs of the Venetian boatmen, or gondoliers, to remain a quaint holdover of yesteryear, this is but one small element in the vast arsenal of the city’s musical history. Countless letters, documents and memoirs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relate fantastic tales of the Venetians’ enthusiasm for and assimilation of music into their everyday lives, from the ordinary shopkeepers and fishermen to those aforementioned gondoliers and up to the esteemed church musicians and famous composers that either called the city home or supplied it with music. The reports and admiration of so many travelers from the European continent contributed greatly to the establishment of Venice as a beacon of culture during this time. “Throughout all the pages written about Venice in the baroque era, music remained one of the principal subjects of interest and—must it be said?—of amazement. Music, much more than the other arts, and on equal footing with

⁶³ Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi’s Venice*, 8-9.

political and religious life in La Serenissima, as the Republic was known, never ceased to attract the attention of travellers [*sic*], even those least interested in it.”⁶⁴ The delight and mystery of Venice thrust it into the spotlight for those seeking amusement, culture, adventure, or even religious spectacle. The uniquely dichotomous aspects of a free and fun-loving people living amid an ever-present and watchful government, and a devout and ritualistic Catholic city with scandalous and divided relations with Rome provided enough intrigue and fascination for all the courts of Europe to journey and find out for themselves if the stories were really true.

Its geography alone was peculiar and unequaled, providing the traveler with his first curiosity upon arrival. “Venice was a kind of open city, different from all the other cities of the time for it possessed no gates, no fortifications, no guards or garrisons of soldiers. It could not be captured by land, nor by sea, for the lagoons were too shallow and prevented any warship from approaching.”⁶⁵ Once inside the city he would be faced with the even more unique organization and layout of the city itself, having to navigate “those 145 canals crossed by 312 stone bridges and 117 wooden ones, those 140 towers and campanili, those 70 parish churches and the innumerable palazzi artistically placed at water level”⁶⁶ not to mention the vast number of boats coming and going on those waterways incessantly. The next alienation from the standards of the European continent would be the difference in calendar and time-keeping. Venice was the last place to adopt the Julian calendar, which begins the year on January 1. Until their surrender to Bonaparte in 1797, the Venetian calendar began on March 1. “The calculation of the time in Venice was also affected by the fact that the city continued to believe that 00 hour was

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 27.

reached when the sun set. Therefore, depending on the months and seasons, the first hour of the day was moved in relation to the sunset.”⁶⁷ This lingering adherence to antiquated or unique time-tables speaks firmly to the Venetian ideology of self-importance. As author Patrick Barbier claims:

...the Venetians, cut off from the world by the relative isolation imposed by the lagoon and communications with the mainland, convinced by centuries of government by a doge that they were a kind of chosen people, born more or less from some alliance between God and the sea, lived day by day in a cheerful and protective autarchy: they were dominated by an unusual taste for work, a form of piety that was highly exteriorised and brazen, sometimes bordering on superstition, and above all by a frenzied need to throw themselves into the delights of music, festivities, gambling and love.⁶⁸

To further enhance the enchantment and tourist trade of the city, Venice’s “super-efficient secret police had won for her a new role as the world centre of espionage, for which the growing ‘tourist’ trade to Venice was a good cover. Where better to go than Venice, that strange, exotic city on water, in which the grandeur of Byzantium and the soaring beauty of Renaissance Europe met in one glorious whole?”⁶⁹ Additionally, the pleasures and revelries of the illustrious Carnivale season and the astoundingly large courtesan industry proved a further boon for the city’s allure. Coincidentally, it is opined that the latter bears significance on the necessity and prevalence of so many orphanages in the city, such as the Ospedale della Pietà, where Vivaldi worked. Wealthy Venetian families naturally wanted the family to continue, and to continue richly. It was therefore the custom that only one son should marry and bear legitimate heirs to the family name. The others were to remain single so as to avoid the dispersal of the family wealth among various heirs. “This enforced bachelorhood may well have accounted for the number of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 18-19.

⁶⁹ H. C. Robbins Landon, *Five Centuries of Music in Venice*, 70.

professional courtesans in Venice.”⁷⁰ It has already been stated above that this philosophy contributed to another standard practice of one child being selected for the clergy, also likely in Vivaldi’s case.

Interestingly, the autonomy and self-importance of the Republic carried over into matters of religious life as well. As this chapter will show, consideration of Venice’s attitude towards the sacred world is a significant aspect which ties the priestly composer to his city. The marriage of sacred church and secular state was quite firm in La Serenissima. “Venetian scholars, such as Paolo Prodi, assert that the Venetian idea of a unified church and state with its sacral concept of power was a principal mark that distinguished Venice from the rest of Christianity. The union of state and church gave a double axis to the Venetian civilization and an ellipsoidal, or ovoid, quality to its form of government that appears to have passed unnoticed by historians.”⁷¹ Understanding this is useful in contemplating the spectacular, worldly and competitive nature of religion in the Republic surrounding Vivaldi’s lifetime.

Although the Venetians were described as being duly devout and steeped in religious observance, there also prevailed a typical stubbornness toward the authority of the church and its supreme leader. A well known axiom from the days of the Republic states ‘Venetians first, Christians second.’ In a letter of 1730 the German Baron Pöllnitz described the atmosphere plainly: “One is in the midst of honest pleasures and debauchery. God receives the same exemplary worship as in any other place in the world. Few people observe the externals of religion more than the Italians do, especially the Venetians. It can be said of them that they spend part of their life in doing wrong and the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁷¹ Jane Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 19.

other half in asking God to forgive them for it.”⁷² Nevertheless, Venice also found distinction and prominence in religious matters. “Due to its prestigious eastern and western past, Venice had been elevated to a patriarchy from 8 October 1457, rising in this way to the level of the metropolises on which Christianity was founded.”⁷³ However, La Serenissima’s relationship with Rome was constantly strained, and this came to a head in 1605 when the new pope, Paul V, decided to take radical action in an attempt to tighten his hold over the Venetian Republic. “An ultimatum was issued to the Republic on Christmas morning, stating that if Venice failed to comply with certain of Rome’s requirements, the Vatican would have no choice but to excommunicate the Republic.”⁷⁴ Typical of her attitude towards Rome (and outside authority in general) the city rejected the excommunication and in a document sent to all the religious heads in the Venetian territories, “the Doge of Venice on that fateful 6 May 1606 himself took what was nearly a heretical stance: he recognized in matters temporal no superior power except the Divine Majesty.”⁷⁵ This proved to be the greatest scandal of its time and forced the Vatican to realize that its power and sway were being challenged more and more, especially since many communities were siding with Venice. The letter took further liberties in cautioning the Vatican that the Republic’s stance and action—or non-action—on the matter might well influence even more communities and powers to do the same. Therefore Rome was forced “to accept an offer from France to mediate, and to accept Venice’s choice of representative in the negotiations. Venice chose Paolo Sarpi, a Servite monk whose relations with Rome were, if possible, worse than the Republic’s. Sarpi proved a brilliant

⁷² Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi’s Venice*, 34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁴ H. C. Robbins Landon, *Five Centuries of Music in Venice*, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1991), 69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

and tough negotiator.”⁷⁶ Finally the interdict against Venice was lifted in April of 1607. The Vatican would never again attempt such an excommunication, but in the manner of “vengeful Renaissance princes, Pope Paul V engaged assassins to murder Paolo Sarpi. On 25 October 1607, he was set upon and stabbed three times whilst making his way from the Servite Monastery to the Doge’s palace. Miraculously he survived this and two other attempts on his life, finally dying peacefully in his bed in 1623.”⁷⁷ Can it be any wonder that this city had the allure of a seventeenth-century “Sin City” Las Vegas? Regardless of the scandalous and besmirched relationship with Rome, Venice continued its religious fervor on its own, again in a distinct manner: Because of its patriarchy, “Venice could count on the double presence of a patriarch observing the Roman rite, and of a *primicerio*, a kind of leader for the chapter of canons at St Mark’s, who was always chosen from among the leading patrician families of the city; his role as ‘chaplain to the doge’ also conferred on him a sizeable amount of political power. While the patriarch officiated at San Pietro di Castello, the *primicerio* resided at St Mark’s and was responsible for celebrating the local Venetian rite, which is still called the ‘marcian’ rite.”⁷⁸ In modern terms, this basically translates into two dioceses for one city, and two head churches; the famous Saint Mark’s (along with only four other churches) governed by the *primicerio* and observing the local Venetian rite, and the traditional cathedral being San Pietro di Castello, headed by the patriarch and observing the Roman Catholic Rite. Aside of his early performing associations with the ducal chapel of Saint Mark’s, Vivaldi and his sacred compositions would be observant of and ordered by the Roman rites. It

⁷⁶ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁸ Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi’s Venice*, 84.

was not until after the fall of the Republic and the dawn of the nineteenth century that the Basilica of Saint Mark's would be made the Cathedral of Venice.

Not only were religion and the observance of religious festivals part of the draw for tourists, but they were an intrinsic spectacle for and by the citizens themselves, and the copious amounts of pageantry, pomp and religious activities in the city would naturally require the aid and embellishment of music. And even here, as in the *ospedali*, rivalry played no small part. Even the smallest of parish churches budgeted for elaborate processions and celebrations at some point. "Hardly any of the other churches, whether monastic, collegiate, or parochial, provided employment on a regular basis for more than an organist, but all of them hired musicians for special occasion—the patronal festival, of course, but also such functions as funerals and investitures. A *maestro di cappella* would be chosen; he would supply the music and recruit the performers."⁷⁹ Aside of the churches associated with the four *ospedali grandi* and the large churches like the ducal chapel of Saint Mark's, there were a few other notable places where spectacles of religion and its accompanying music took place in Venice. "Some of them are well known to historians for their music—for instance, the Philippine church of Santa Maria della Fava, which promoted oratorio vigorously from 1671 onwards, and the two convents for female members of the Venetian nobility, San Lorenzo and Santa Maria della Celestia, which vied with one another to secure the best musicians...for their patronal festivals, on 10 August and 15 August respectively."⁸⁰ Numerous travelers have supplied us with letters regarding the marvelous performances by both institutions, as well as a detailed account by the eighteenth-century Venetian historian Pietro Gradenigo. Especially large was the

⁷⁹ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 113.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

feast of San Lorenzo. Although likely composed for a Roman church, one of Vivaldi's concertos was written precisely for the Solemnità di San Lorenzo (in C Major RV 556)⁸¹ "No convent celebration in the religious calendar surpassed this event in splendour and musical quality."⁸² Since the women of these convents were of noble families, many were doubtless forced into religious life on the aforementioned principal of protecting the family wealth from over-dispersal. "On the appointed day people crowded round the convent doors, opened wide for the occasion, and were welcomed by these high society nuns who conversed with everyone as freely as if they were in a drawing-room."⁸³ The church itself would also be highly decorated and festooned with flowers, garlands, paintings, bunting, and a multitude of candles and torches. "Notable, two, were the annual celebrations of the feast of St. Cecilia (22 November) at San Martino by the Sovegno di Santa Cecilia. The core of the membership of this society was the *cappella* of San Marco, but its net spread much wider."⁸⁴ The attempts at showmanship and one-upping one's neighbor or competitor were certainly not only for the greater honor and glory of God. The aspect of human satisfaction and accreditation would have been quite a motivating factor as well.

An important element in all these special celebrations was the desire to surprise: *la meraviglia*. Most commonly, this was achieved by sheer ostentation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the much-prized quality of 'generosity' (today we would regard it more as profligacy), which entailed the spending of vast sums on public spectacles, affected the sacred as much as the secular sphere. Every church had its noble benefactors, for whom the notion of public-mindedness consisted precisely in the underwriting of its principal ceremonies. The more lavish the undertaking, the more credit accruing to its organizers.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi's Venice*, 105

⁸² Ibid., 103.

⁸³ Ibid., 104.

⁸⁴ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 115.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 115.

But many visitors to the city would notice and question the motives. The apparent devotion and morality of the Venetian people was conspicuously juxtaposed with disconnected rituals and mere rote observances. In Venice as well as in other regions of Italy, there was

...a mixture of highly exteriorised faith, very close to superstition, along with an exaggerated taste for the pomp of ceremonies against a background of a somewhat dissolute lifestyle...Many foreigners noticed this strange superimposition on very regular and orthodox religious practice, of rules, rituals, gestures and attitudes which bordered on superstition...This led to the permanent confusion between a very free life, relaxed morals along with a superficial faith on one side and on the other a total, or almost total constancy in their assiduous attachment to the great ritual Christian celebrations, which guaranteed the stability and spiritual power of the Republic.⁸⁶

However pious or misguided the motivation, Venice was unrivaled for sheer number of religious festivals. One of the most important—and peculiar—Venetian celebrations has coincided with the feast of the Ascension since the twelfth century. It was on this day that the doge would attend High Mass and following the service would ride out to the lagoon in a large and elaborate gondola or boat, called the Bucintoro, “attended by ambassadors and other nobles, led by a stately procession to sea where the doge threw a consecrated ring into the waves with the words: *Desponamus te, Mare, in signum veri perpetique dominii* (We wed thee, O sea, in sign of veritable and perpetual domination).”⁸⁷

But even outside of the large canon of special or local Venetian celebrations there exists the opportunity and necessity for music within the regular hierarchy of the Catholic Church itself. A complex system of precedence exists to resolve the problem of status concerning conflicting saints’ feast days. Namely, what occasion gets celebrated on what day. This is made more complex by the Venetian predilection to combine church and

⁸⁶ Patrick Barbier, *Vivaldi’s Venice*, 87.

⁸⁷ John Booth, *Vivaldi*, (London: Omnibus Press, 1989), 15-16.

state celebrations, as seen above with the celebration of Ascension and countless others. Regardless of Vivaldi's own attitudes or beliefs, whether or not we count him among the multitude which commonly only 'exteriorized' their faith, or whether or not we speculate that his priesthood had any bearing on the spirituality of his music, as a composer of sacred music he was obliged to follow the church calendar and all of its guidelines. These expectations would certainly have affected or prescribed what compositions and settings were required of him, and any other composer in his position. "In Vivaldi's time the Venetian state routinely transferred numerous *fete di precetto* (feasts of obligation) naturally occurring on a weekday to a Sunday; this had the dual advantage of reducing the total number of feasts, which always threatened to be excessive, and of concentrating major celebrations on days when maximum attendance by the populace could be expected."⁸⁸ According to today's General Instruction of the Roman Missal, this system remains largely unchanged. While this system of hierarchy mainly relates to celebrations of the Mass, the highest form of liturgical rite, it also has bearing on the Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours. It is under this heading that a Vespers service falls and will be the next subject of examination in this study of Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus*.

⁸⁸ Michael Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 62.

CHAPTER 5

The Divine Office

The Divine Office is “a series of worship services performed in the course of each day and night in the Roman Catholic Church. The origins of the Divine Office may be traced back to early Christian customs of praying at regular times of the day. These times included the early morning and late evening, and sometimes the third, sixth and ninth hours. Such prayer, though probably private in the earliest centuries, became public no later than the emancipation of Christianity under Constantine (313).”⁸⁹ The eight different services are called, in order from earliest morning to latest evening: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. “The services in the Divine Office are composed of psalms and canticles with antiphons, lessons followed by responsories, hymns, versicles with responses and prayers. The arrangement of these in the Office in the course of the day and year follows a fixed pattern, referred to as the *cursus*. There are two somewhat different *cursus*: the Roman *cursus*, followed in churches, which was not given a precise description until Amalarius of Metz (c830); and the monastic *cursus*, followed in monasteries, for which there is an outline in the Rule of St Benedict.”⁹⁰ The service of Vespers, at twilight or lighting of the lamps, was often celebrated in public, as opposed to some of the other offices, which are normally celebrated in private by the clergy. This service would therefore be an ideal place to showcase the talent and training of the *figlie di coro* of the Pietà.

Vivaldi wrote considerably more vespers settings than mass settings. Though this may to some extent be coincidental, it does indicate the relatively greater musical

⁸⁹ Ruth Steiner and Keith Falconer, “Divine Office,” *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/07868> (accessed 10 July 2013)

⁹⁰ Ibid.

importance of vespers for church life in Venice. Helmut Hucke rightly attributed this ‘to the development of public musical life,’ with vespers being an occasion for public musical performances at which it was quite customary to charge admission. Hucke considered vespers ‘the afternoon musical performance in Italian cities complementary to the operas performed during the evening.’ It follows, therefore, that the performance of vespers psalms represented ‘the most characteristic genre of Italian church music around 1730.’⁹¹

While this time reference is later than Vivaldi’s first prolific period as sacred music composer at the Pietà, it was doubtless the same in the few years before. The public celebration of any of the services of the Divine Office was indeed an ideal opportunity to raise funds, that is, to charge admission, as Canon law 848 does leave room for interpretation, especially since participation on Vespers is not a sacrament: “The minister should ask nothing for the administration of the sacraments beyond the offerings defined by the competent authority, always being careful that the needy are not deprived of the help of the sacraments because of their poverty.”⁹² The competent authority is described as the bishops of any specific province. Since this does not apply to other acts of worship outside of the seven sacraments, an admission could be charged for the Vespers service. Hence, we again see the blending of practicality and worldliness with the realm of the sacred in Venice.

The Liturgical structure of the Vespers service in Vivaldi’s day was slightly different than it appears in the modern day, having been substantially revised under the Second Vatican Council in 1963, but essentially contained the same elements as it currently does. “Vespers comprise Second Vespers, celebrated in the mid or late afternoon of the feast in question, and First Vespers, celebrated at the same time of day

⁹¹ Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi*, 84-86.

⁹² James Coriden, Thomas Green and Donald Heintschel, eds. *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 613-614.

on its Vigil (Eve).”⁹³ Vivaldi scholar Michael Talbot outlines the ceremony as performed in Vivaldi’s Day: “The service opens with the versicle ‘Deus in adjutorium meum intende’, intoned by the priest, which is followed by a sung respond, ‘Domine ad adjuvandum me festina’; this, like the psalms and canticle, concludes with the Lesser Doxology (‘Gloria Patri...Amen’). There follows a sequence of five psalms, each with an antiphon that comes either before or after it. After the psalmody the service includes two sung items: a strophic hymn and a canticle (Magnificat).”⁹⁴ While the opening versicle, a request for God’s assistance, and the canticle are always unvaried throughout the year, the psalms differ according to feasts, or classes of feasts, of the particular day. As already stated, any evening could be celebrated as the Second Vespers of that feast day or the First Vespers of the next day’s feast. This was decided, once again, according to a complex system of ranking and prominence. Of the five required psalms for any day’s service, psalms 109, 110, 111, and 112 were used most frequently, with 109 (Dixit Dominus) being the only one prescribed for every Vespers service. Obviously, the frequency with which a psalm was set to music often relates to its frequency of use in the rotation of psalms throughout the year. Of the twenty-eight categories of feasts or commons, the Nisi Dominus (Psalm 126) was required by four. “The surviving partbooks from the Pietà in the Fondo Esposti confirm that when composers wrote a cycle of five psalms, the Dixit Dominus was invariably set, and the following three psalms (110, 111, and 112) nearly always. It was the fifth psalm in particular that defined the occasion on which the cycle was first introduced to the repertory of a particular church.”⁹⁵ In 1752 the Venetian Printer Antonio Groppo produced a publication which acted as a libretto of

⁹³ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 69.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 70.

sorts for those attending the Vespers services at the *Ospedali grandi*. It lists the psalms sung on each feast (or class of feast) and prints their text. (see Table 1)

TABLE 1. Vesper Psalms at the Venetian *Ospedali grandi*⁹⁶

Feast	Psalms															
1-5	109	110	111	112	113											
6-9	109	110	111	112		115										
10-17	109	110	111	112			116									
18	109	110	111	112									131			
19	109	110	111	112										137		
20	109	110	111	112												147
21	109	110	111									129	131			
22	109	110	111									129		137		
23	109	110				115					127					147
24-27	109			112				121		126						147
28	109			112		115			125						138	
<i>Key to Psalms (Vulgate numbering)</i> 109 Dixit Dominus 110 Confitebor tibi Domine...in consilio 111 Beatus Vir 112 Laudate pueri Dominum 113 In exitu Israel 115 Credidi propter quod 116 Laudate Dominum omnes gentes 121 Laetatus sum 125 In convertendo 126 Nisi Dominus 127 Beati omnes 129 De profundis 131 Memento Domine 137 Confitebor tibi Domine...quoniam 138 Domine probast me 147 Lauda Jerusalem																
<i>Key to Feasts</i> 1 Sundays 2 Epiphany of Our Lord 3 Resurrection of Our Lord (and Octave) 4 Pentecost (and Octave) 5 Trinity Sunday 6 Holy Name of Jesus 7 Common of One Martyr 8 All Saints 9 Christmas Day †* 10 Epiphany of Our Lord †* 11 Ascension Day 12 Common of Apostles and Evangelists †* 13 Common of One Martyr †* 14 Common of a Confessor Bishop † 15 Common of a Confessor not a Bishop * 16 All Saints † 17 Guardian Angels † 18 Common of a Confessor Bishop 19 Guardian Angels 20 Dedication of a Church * 21 Christmas Day (and Octave) 22 Redentore 23 Corpus Domini (and Octave) 24 St. Sylvester 25 Circumcision of Our Lord 26 Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary 27 Common of Virgins 28 Common of Apostles and Evangelists																

† First Vespers only.

* When the feast falls on a Sunday

⁹⁶ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 71.

From what survives of the Pietà's partbooks, one can piece together a good idea of its repertory from about the 1720s onwards. "Because of the conservative nature of the institution, it is very unlikely that this was significantly different in the early part of Vivaldi's employment there. Vesper psalms dominate...the most common sequence is that for Marian feasts (109, 112, 121, 126, 147) and the next most common that for Sundays (109, 110, 111, 112, 113)." ⁹⁷ Scholars believe that the likelihood of use for the *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608 on the patronal feast of the Pietà to be very high. This would be the feast day of the Visitation of the Blessed Mother, July 2 on the Italian calendar. "In the eighteenth century the four *cori* alternated in presenting afternoon musical events on the four Sundays of each month in the manner that had been introduced into the Basilica [Saint Mark's] by Willaert. On the fourth Sunday of each month, for instance, oratorios and other types of vocal and concerted music were heard at the Mendicanti. The second Sunday of the month was reserved for similar musical emphasis at the Derelitti. Presumably, the first and third Sundays had been allocated either to the Incurabili or to the Pietà." ⁹⁸ Regardless of which institution might be featured with extra or embellished music on a certain Sunday, however, public presentations at each of the institutions included "Compline and Litanies on Saturdays, Vespers on Sunday and *feste di precetto* and Mass on solemn feasts." ⁹⁹

The place where these services and concerts would take place would be the chapel connected with each of the *ospedali*. "The chapel, or rather church, serving the Pietà during Vivaldi's time was its second, built c. 1640. It occupied a site on the Riva degli

⁹⁷ Ibid., 102-103.

⁹⁸ Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice*, 132.

⁹⁹ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 101.

Schiavoni just beyond the Calle della Pietà, which separated it from other buildings also owned by the Pietà that were eventually demolished to make room for the third church, Santa Maria della Visitazione.”¹⁰⁰ The cornerstone of this church was laid in 1745, four years after Vivaldi’s death. The only remnants of the Vivaldi-era building are two columns which can still be seen in the hotel lobby next to the present church. In Vivaldi’s time, the performers would have been partially hidden by screens or grilles which covered the choir lofts. Michael Talbot describes the church that Vivaldi knew:

The second church was not large, being about 20 metres deep, ten metres wide and somewhat over ten metres high. It had five altars and was decorated with several paintings by well-known masters (Johann Carl Loth, Santo Peranda, Iacopo Palma, Antonio Cecchini, Sebastiano Mazzoni and Giovanni Carboncini). The organ-loft over the main altar, renovated in 1693, was the only fixed accommodation for the musicians until a resolution of the governors, passed at the third attempt on 6 August 1723, enabled the construction of two lateral choir lofts. There is no evidence that, up to this point, the choir had ever been divided into two for works ‘in due cori’, but thereafter, this style of performance became common. In 1735 a lateral *coretto* was constructed for the second organ.¹⁰¹

Whether it was used as a sacred vehicle for prayer and communing with God, for pure concertizing, or for mere fundraising, the church played host to the *coro* and all of its congregations. Having examined the purpose and the format of a public worship service for which Vivaldi would have composed—namely the Vespers service of the Divine Office—as well as the institution for which he would have composed, attention must be turned, at least briefly, to the receiving end of these spectacles: those throngs of people who frequented such services and reported about them in such detail. We have already discussed some of the peculiar attitudes and dispositions of the Venetian people towards the action of the church, and they were of course known throughout Europe, but even visitors “from Catholic Europe were puzzled and scandalized by the habit among some

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 99-101.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 101.

congregations of rotating their seats during the service to face the musicians rather than the altar.”¹⁰² The unifying and enchanting power of music to not only speak to the senses but also to the spiritual mind eventually overcame the congregation’s focus and understanding of the ritual action itself.

So much has happened, especially since the Second Vatican Council, to change the relationship between clergy and laity in the Catholic Church that it requires a real act of imagination to recapture in one’s mind the spirit and atmosphere of a service in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The segregation of the roles of the priest and the congregation (to borrow a sociological term) was well-nigh absolute; the former was active, the latter passive. This passivity, broken only by short, rote-learned responses, turned the congregation willy-nilly into an audience: a group assembled for the purpose of receiving visual, aural and olfactory sensations. In this special sense, all Catholic services were, in part, ‘concerts’. The non-participatory role of Catholic congregations marked them off from their counterparts in the contemporary reformed churches.¹⁰³

The significant factor in this can be found in the direct relation of these peoples’ tastes, preferences, and expectations to the stylistic development of the composers of the era of sacred music. As Talbot offers, Vivaldi’s work as a composer sits between two distinct epochs. “In the first, represented by such older composers as Colonna, Legrenzi and Bassani, church music constitutes a self-sufficient world within which a composer is able to earn great prestige without venturing into other realms. It is not affected by developments in other branches of music... This high reputation derived not only from their skill and industriousness but also from a predisposition by the public in favour of church music as a species.”¹⁰⁴ The new influencing factor became, during Vivaldi’s lifetime and especially after, the operatic convention. This second epoch, after Vivaldi, became the almost complete by-product of operatic composition. Even the most famous star of the operatic stage, the most sought-after castrato of all time, Farinelli, performed

¹⁰² Ibid., 60.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 80.

in church when he visited Venice. Composers were no longer valued principally for their church music. Vivaldi belonged to a time which, although fostering the seeds of decadence, did not allow them to grow. “But in his striving to become a truly universal composer, in which he succeeded more brilliantly than any other Italian master of his time, he allowed the traditional values of church music to mingle freely in his consciousness with those of progressive instrumental and operatic music.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 80.

CHAPTER 6

Tracing a Translation

Naturally one of the first and most rudimentary processes that any performer or student of a score would have to undertake is an examination of the text of the work to be studied or performed. If it is not in the native tongue then a reputable translation must be sought to understand and accurately convey the meaning of the original text. With *Nisi Dominus, RV 608* the task seems rather simple, since the subtitle literally points the way: *Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso* (Psalm 126 for contralto, two violins, viola and bass). The natural inclination is to reach for one's Bible for a convenient and scholarly translation: The first problem. There are a staggering number of versions or translations of the scriptures in part and in total. "By the opening of the year 2000, the entire Bible had been made available in 371 languages and dialects, and portions of the Bible in 1,862 other languages and dialects."¹⁰⁶ As Vivaldi was a Catholic priest composing for a Catholic worship service, it seems easily justifiable that this study will only consider those sources as identified and approved by the Catholic Church. The next obstacle arrives when one looks to the 126th chapter of the Book of Psalms. In any English-language Catholic Bible one will not find the text Vivaldi was using. In fact, what Vivaldi knew as Psalm 126 is numbered as 127 today. Why is this and how is the student of music to be directed to the correct place for a translation? The divergence of enumeration does not occur with Vivaldi, but only recently comes to light with regard to biblical translations.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 9.

The lineage of the Bible and its sources, scholars and translators is an immense and intricate one. For our understanding of Vivaldi's approach to the text, there are only a few key factors to consider. To begin, Vivaldi would certainly have used his breviary as a source for the text to Psalm 126. This is a "liturgical book containing the Liturgy of the Hours, formerly called the Divine Office. The breviary represents a late medieval compilation of several books: the antiphonary or book of short verses (antiphons), psalter or book of psalms, lectionary, or book of lessons, martyrology or book of martyrs, and hymnary or book of hymns."¹⁰⁷ The Psalms in this book would have been taken from and numbered in accordance with the church's only official translation of the Bible at his time: the Vulgate Bible, which was translated by Saint Jerome by 405 A.D. Jerome had two sources available to him: the New Testament in its original Greek form, and the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, which was the only translation from the original Hebrew into Greek, done by a group of Jewish elders circa 200 B.C. These rabbis changed slightly the enumeration of the Psalms from the original Hebrew scriptures when they prepared their Greek translations. Jerome took these two sources and made a Latin translation, as that was the common language of the Roman Empire at the time, and that was known as the Vulgate Bible (hence our word "vulgar" or "common"). For well over a thousand years this retained supremacy as the only official translation of the Bible, until Martin Luther, as part of his break with the Catholic Church in the 1500s, published his own German-language Bible. As part of the Counter-Reformation by Rome, the Council of Trent in 1546 re-affirmed the Vulgate's canonical and authoritative status. Any translation into a vernacular language was made from the Vulgate, not from the original

¹⁰⁷ Richard P. McBrien, ed. *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 196.

Hebrew or Greek sources. Amazingly, it was not until the twentieth century that the Catholic Church re-examined the Vulgate’s status and effectiveness. In his 1943 encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Pope Pius XII not only allowed but encouraged scholars to delve past the Vulgate and back to the original Greek and Hebrew scriptures for new, vernacular language translations. By doing this, twentieth-century scholars bypassed the Vulgate and the point where the numbering system changed, returning to the original Hebrew enumeration. This accounts for the difference in our Bibles versus what Vivaldi would have known in the 1700s. Both versions contain a total of 150 Psalms; the divergence of numbering occurs at not one, but four different points: “Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 are treated as one psalm in the Vulgate (9), as are Psalms 114 and 115 (Vulgate 113); but Hebrew Psalms 116 and 147 were each subdivided into two separate psalms in the Vulgate (respectively 114, 115, and 146, 147).”¹⁰⁸ Hence we are able to understand that Vivaldi’s choice of Psalm (126 in the Vulgate) was not one that was separated or combined, but merely the result of others being treated that way, and so we can find the appropriate text simply one number off (127) in our modern English translations of the Bible. The following chart ¹⁰⁹ sets them out side by side:

TABLE 2. Psalter comparison by translation

Hebrew	Vulgate
<i>Ancient and 20th Century</i>	<i>Vivaldi’s Era</i>
1—8	1—8
9, 10	9
11—113	10—112
114, 115	113
116	114, 115
117—146	116—145
147	146, 147
148—150	148—150

¹⁰⁸ John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 68.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Vivaldi's choice of text falls into a category of fifteen psalms which are grouped as "Songs of Ascent." All fifteen begin with that superscription. "Most probably these fifteen psalms once formed a collection of psalms sung when pilgrims went to Jerusalem, since one 'ascended' to Jerusalem or to the house of God or to an altar. Less probable is the explanation that these psalms were sung by the exiles when they 'ascended' to Jerusalem from Babylonia. The idea, found in the Mishnah, that the fifteen steps on which the Levites sang correspond to these fifteen psalms must underlie the Vulgate translation *canticum graduum*, 'song of the steps' or 'gradual song'." The psalm which Vivaldi used for this sacred vocal work is the only one which claims to be written by Solomon. "The reasons for this specification probably include Solomon's role as patron of the wisdom literature and Temple builder."¹¹⁰ The metaphors of the "house" ("*domum*") and "to build" ("*aedificare*") which hold such a prominent place in the psalm's text also point strongly to this. All of the original Latin text and its translations are given in the following chapters which examine the movements of the score individually.

Thus the search for a translation for Vivaldi's text of *Nisi Dominus, RV 608* proves extremely illuminating in the consideration of the history and timeline of biblical translations. While not affecting the spiritual or theological nature of the treatment of the text itself by the composer, knowledge of the source material and differing enumeration of the Book of Psalms is found to be very pertinent information to the modern-day researcher.

¹¹⁰ Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 548.

CHAPTER 7

Score Commentary

I. Nisi Dominus

Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam.
Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build.

Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem, frustra vigilat qui custodit eam.
Unless the Lord guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch.

Vivaldi combines verses one and two of the psalm together for the text of the opening movement. The parallel opening words of both being *Nisi Dominus* would lend naturalness to this approach. “His word setting is once again a little scrappy, for on their final statement, the words ‘frustra vigilat qui custodit eam’ (‘the watchman waketh but in vain’) lack their vital preceding clause (‘Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem’), so making it appear, improbably, that the success of the watchmen, like that of the builders, depends on the Lord’s building the house. In musical respects, however, this is a splendidly vigorous and inventive movement.”¹¹¹ Commentary by the New American Bible states however, that the psalm puts together two proverbs on God establishing “houses” or families. Therefore we can see that the house is a metaphor and not an actual construction. “The prosperity of human groups is not the work of humans but the gift of God.”¹¹² “As is common in Vivaldi’s large-scale multimovement works, it’s opening and penultimate movements are based on the same energetic yet intense music, notable for its springy rhythms and wide leaps between differing registers.”¹¹³ However, regarding the large leaps and sequential figures up and down, one might also draw the conclusion of a

¹¹¹ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 274.

¹¹² *Saint Joseph Edition of The New American Bible*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1991), 690n.

¹¹³ Bella Brover-Lubovsky, *Tonal Space in the Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 134.

musical *quid pro quo* of sorts, in which the *Nisi* (unless) stands as conditional impetus for the large gaps. The constant interplay and attention to earthy builders and watchmen as compared to God on high could also lend a text painting example.

Example 1. Opening of *Nisi Dominus*.

I Allegro

The musical score is for the opening of 'Nisi Dominus' by Vivaldi, marked 'I Allegro'. It features five staves: Violino I, Violino II, Viola, Contralto, and Basso. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is common time (C). The score shows a symmetrical eight-measure period. The Violino I and II parts start with a forte (f) dynamic, followed by a piano (p) section, and then a forte (f) section. The Viola part also starts with a forte (f) dynamic, followed by a piano (p) section, and then a forte (f) section. The Contralto part is silent throughout. The Basso part starts with a forte (f) dynamic, followed by a piano (p) section, and then a forte (f) section. The score is marked with a double bar line and a sharp sign (#) at the end.

“The instrumental ritornello includes an unusually symmetrical eight-measure period modulating to Bb major, reinforced by an exact repetition of the second phrase. The vocal period commences in G minor, and is terminated by a similar closure in Bb major on ‘aedificant eam’ (measure 27). The brief ripieno interjection is heard again in G minor, and the second verse starts from the same point, this time closing in D minor (measure 44). In this movement, tonal discursiveness is linked to the thematic recurrence of ritornello material, branching out in different directions.”¹¹⁴ In other words, Vivaldi’s extravagant excursions towards other tonal centers are linked to fragmentary returns of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 134.

the ritornello music. This wandering into peripheral keys is seen as a standard practice of introducing tonal contrast.

A protracted closing section in the tonic (measures 45-70) repeats the whole text, although there the dance-periodicity and symmetry in the first part are shaded by an intimately melismatic text delivery. From this point onwards, harmonic motions toward the mediant and dominant are confirmed by full closures, which are immediately negated by tonic restatements. This creates a context whereby a proportionally protracted stage of establishing the peripheral degree by a closure is immediately overridden by the tonic's restatement, destabilizing the newly reached tonal center and subjugating it to the main key...Eventually, the absence of a smooth harmonic link between peripheral degree and central sonority confirms the subordination of all other harmonic events to the tonic.¹¹⁵

Structurally, the movement as a whole bears relation to Vivaldi's instrumental forms. This is no insignificant fact, as it is widely accepted that his is the standard in the concerto form. "The opening movement of this psalm provides a particularly vivid example of the role that both formal principles and structural elements, coming from Vivaldi's instrumental concertos, played in his sacred music. The movement, which lasts seventy bars, is largely indistinguishable from that of a concerto allegro: it displays a clear ritornello form, and the twelve-bar ritornello that opens the movement (and the work) and returns in the material of the penultimate movement, the 'Sicut erat,' is a prime example of a concerto ritornello."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹¹⁶ Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi*, 87.

II. Vanum est vobis

Vanum est vobis ante lucem surgere:
It is vain for you to rise before dawn:

One of two movements set for voice and continuo alone, this short piece in 3/4 time is totally characterized by the opening style of the French overture. Originating in the ballet overtures of Lully in the 1650s, this style quickly became the standard for opera and ballet overtures, and flourished for at least 60 years. After French composers adopted this practice, it quickly spread to other European centers, “aided no doubt by the abundance of French music and musicians at provincial and foreign courts during the later 17th century.”¹¹⁷ This form could have arrived on the Venetian scene by 1669 with the performance there of Pietro Cesti’s opera *L’Argia*. The standard structure was in two movements: the first being slow and stately and the second a lively fugal section. As movement two of Vivaldi’s *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608 is actually just a semiverse of the psalm, this separation fits neatly, as will be further seen in the next movement. *Vanum est vobis* is akin to the opening section of a French overture. “The most conspicuous stylistic feature of the first section is its combination of a slow tempo (usually marked *grave* or *lent*) with dotted rhythms, often called *saccade* (meaning “jerked”). The dotted rhythms sometimes move along at differing paces...and those in longer values invite exaggerated performance to bring all the short notes down to the same value...This kind of rhythm gave rise more than any other stylistic element to the descriptive adjectives commonly applied to the opening section: majestic, heroic, festive and pompous.”¹¹⁸ Perhaps in this

¹¹⁷ George Waterman and James Anthony, “French overture,” *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/10210> (accessed July 17, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

final label we see a glimpse of Vivaldi's intention. The vanity of rising early which the psalmist describes is musically expressed in this pompous and slightly ostentatious style. This is especially evident in the longest melismatic passage, which is set to the word *vanum* (vain). This passage also clearly embodies the dotted French style.

Example 2. Measures 15-21 of *Vanum est vobis*.



Even so, Talbot calls this “an imaginatively conceived composite movement...Even in so simple a texture, Vivaldi has no difficulty in demonstrating great artistry; the motivic content of the bass part, derived from the ritornello, and its phrase-structure maintain an attractive independence from the vocal line.”¹¹⁹ The rising and falling shape of the vocal line, especially at the words *ante lucem surgere* (to rise before dawn), provides text painting evocative of one's emergence from slumber or the ascent of the sun towards daybreak. Additionally, the *Vanum est vobis* movement adheres to the common slow tempo convention, being marked *Largo*, but it diverges in the matter of time, since binary meters were almost universal in the standards of slow movements of French overture. The home key of Bb major, which is set up by the opening ritornello, is brought to a final cadence on the dominant, again typical of the completion of the French overture slow movement.

¹¹⁹ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 274.

By Vivaldi's time, although still popular, the style began to be mixed with the rival Italian *sinfonia* style (a fast-slow-fast form) and was eventually overtaken by it. However, the French style remains a source of discussion and even controversy in the modern twentieth and twenty-first century era of historically informed performance practices. "The problem concerns the double dotting (or overdotting) of notes and rests within the context of passages dominated by dotted rhythms. The conventional view, adhered to by most musicologists, was that in a French overture the lengthening of the dotted note and the corresponding shortening of the complementary note was common practice in performance. That view was first challenged in 1965 by Frederick Neumann, who held that the concept of double dotting was 'essentially a legend'." ¹²⁰ New and continuing scholarship on the matter provides more information for both camps, but the debate lingers. However, Talbot does suggest that the inequality "will gain in effect if exaggerated in performance." ¹²¹

¹²⁰ Waterman and Anthony, "French overture," *Grove Music Online*.

¹²¹ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso, RV 608*. ed. Michael Talbot, 68.

III. Surgite

Surgite postquam sederitis, qui manducatis panem doloris.
Rise after you have rested, you that eat the bread of sorrow.

“The third and fourth movements show especially well how individual movements differ sharply in musical invention, and they demonstrate the extent to which structure conforms to given images in the text.”¹²² In this third movement, the second half of the verse which began in movement two, the feeling of urgency is immediately conveyed in the Presto tempo by the repeated cry of *Surgite*, the imperative form of the verb to rise, and accompanied by rushing upward scales on the strings. This is nearly an operatic recitative-type utterance. This beginning example also slightly hints at the completion of the French overture style described in movement two. The standard second section of the French style is a lively fugal portion. While there is not a valid subject and countersubject found in this short space to term it a fugue, the stretto entrances are a commonplace technique in fugues.

¹²² Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi*, 86.

Example 3. Opening of movement 3 (*Surgite*).

III Presto

Violino I
(*f*)

Violino II
(*f*)

Viola
(*f*)

Contralto
Sur - gi-te, sur - gi-te,

Basso
(*f*)

This tension is broken by the next vocal period in a quick shift to Adagio, the slower tempo expressive of the direction by the psalmist to rise after you have rested (*postquam sederitis*).

Example 4. Measures 3-5 of *Surgite*.

Adagio

3
p

3
p

3
p

3
sur - gi-te post-quam se - de - ri-tis, qui man-du-ca-tis pa-nem do-lo -

3
(*p*)

6

The next musical convention is one that Vivaldi employed widely in both instrumental and sacred vocal music: the *passus duriusculus*, also known as the lament bass. This technique involves a chromatic descent of the bass line, often of a fourth. The traditional association of half steps with sighing or a lamenting affect is the obvious ancestry of this practice. Theorist Bella Brover-Lubovsky points out that the straightforward use of the lament bass is “discernible in virtually every concerto in *Estro armonico* (op. 3) and also in those sacred compositions written during the period of his replacement of Francesco Gasparini...at the Pietà (1713-1717). These include Vagaus’s two arias from the first part of *Juditha triumphans*, the ‘Donec ponam’ and ‘De torrente’ from the polychoral *Dixit Dominus* RV 594, along with the ‘Surgite’ from *Nisi Dominus* RV 608. It is worth noting that in all these works Vivaldi exuberantly supplements lament topoi with contrasting thematic cells.”¹²³ Vivaldi cunningly uses this lamenting affect to underlay the text *qui manducatis panem doloris* (you that eat the bread of sorrow). The *passus duriusculus* can be seen in the following example, under the word *doloris*.

¹²³ Brover-Lubovsky, *Tonal Space in the Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 166-167.

Example 5. *Passus duriusculus* technique in *Surgite*.

The musical score for Example 5, titled "Passus duriusculus technique in *Surgite*", is presented in a multi-staff format. The staves are labeled VI I, VI II, Vla, Contralto, and Basso. The Contralto part features a melodic line with a sharp sign (#) and the word "ris." below it. The Basso part includes a bass line with a sharp sign (#) and the word "ris." below it. The score is in G major and 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals, illustrating the "Passus duriusculus" technique.

While this arioso Adagio section provides beautiful text painting and striking contrast with the agitated Presto sections, Brover-Lobovsky opines that “such thematic lavishness could have prompted contemporary criticisms of Vivaldi’s extravagant style.”¹²⁴

Nevertheless, as in the original motivation for sacred iconography and stained-glass windows, telling the story in an accessible and easily discernible manner is a hallmark of religious teaching and the legacy of the church. Whether influenced by operatic convention or brazen techniques, Vivaldi succeeds in chronicling the psalmist’s themes in musical form.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 167.

IV. Cum dederit

*Cum dederit dilectis suis somnum: ecce haereditas Domini, filii:
merces, fructus ventris.*

All this God gives to his beloved in sleep. Children too are a gift from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb, a reward.

The fourth movement is rife with compositional techniques and text painting which Vivaldi uses to great effect to support this part of the text. “Returning to G minor... *Cum dederit somnum* is among Vivaldi’s most memorable utterances in siciliana rhythm.”¹²⁵ Siciliana is a term commonly used to refer to “an aria type and instrumental movement popular in the late 17th and 18th centuries. It was normally in a slow 6/8 or 12/8, characterized by clear one- or two-bar phrases, a quaver upbeat giving an iambic feeling to the rhythm, simple melodies and clear, direct harmonies.”¹²⁶ This indeed accurately describes Vivaldi’s fourth movement of the Psalm, in 12/8 meter. Although he did not label it as such, few composers actually did so. Some of the most famous examples of the style, such as Handel’s “He shall feed his flock” from *Messiah* and Susanna’s fourth-act aria “Deh vieni non tardar” from Mozart’s opera *Le nozze di Figaro*, are neither so described by their creators. Such musical pieces in this style do often convey a similar affect or scene though: one of a pastoral, pious, or somnolent atmosphere. It has been suggested that the siciliana rhythm has roots in Venice itself, but it was employed significantly throughout the whole of Europe in the baroque era.

Some early 20th-century scholars linked the Baroque aria type with the dance; Wolff suggested that it began as a popular Venetian dance, perhaps exploiting local colour, like the *forlana* and *napolitana*... Siciliana movements appeared in much 18th-century instrumental music, especially in works influenced by Italian style. After the 18th century, however, the style fell into disuse; Meyerbeer’s

¹²⁵ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 275.

¹²⁶ Meredith Ellis Little, “Siciliana,” *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/25698> (accessed on July 16, 2013).

Robert le diable (1831) includes a fast ‘sicilienne’ in the finale of Act 1, and Fauré used a siciliana in the third entr’acte of his incidental music for *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1898), but these examples seem to have been exceptional.¹²⁷

Certainly the structure and theme of the entire movement revolves around a core theme of sleep, as depicted in the opening text of God giving sleep (*somnum*) to his beloved (*dilectis suis*). The gentle rocking rhythm of the siciliana proves a perfect background for association with somnolence, “such as may be found occasionally in sacred music of the time in Christmas scenes at the crib.”¹²⁸ In addition to that technique, Talbot offers specifically that lethargy “is conveyed by the slowness of the harmonic rhythm; for long stretches at a time, the harmony consists simply of oscillations between six-four and five-three chords over the same bass note.”¹²⁹ This technique of wielding a pedal point is another of the composer’s hallmarks. “Vivaldi is prone to deploy pedal points for the purposes of expression and sonority. Protracted pedals on the tonic are firmly associated with images and figurative hints of lethargy or somnolence.”¹³⁰ In conjunction with this, Vivaldi employs an additional tactic, called *trommelbass*, which was popular in the eighteenth century. From the German for “drum bass,” this is “a device that Quantz condemned but whose appositeness in this particular context can hardly be questioned.”¹³¹ The compositional devices of *trommelbass*, pedal point, and siciliana rhythm can all be seen in the following score example from the opening measures of the fourth movement:

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work*, 201.

¹²⁹ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 275.

¹³⁰ Brover-Lubovsky, *Tonal Space in the Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 190.

¹³¹ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 275.

Example 6. Compositional devices in *Cum dederit* opening measures.

IV Andante

Violino I
(*p*) con piombi

Violino II
(*p*) (con piombi)

Viola
(*p*) con piombi

Contralto
(*p*)

Basso
(*p*) tasto solo
(organo solo)

Also seen in this example are two further devices which Vivaldi used to convey the atmosphere. Each of the string parts are instructed to play *con piombi*. This is Vivaldi's own indication, not a modern editorial marking. This is a muting technique which differs from the normal *con sordino* indication of a small clamp, usually wooden, placed on the bridge of the string instrument. Rather, *con piombi* indicates the use of heavy lead mutes. The deadening effect on the sound would be even more marked with this unique type of mute. The final layer of the characteristic scarcity of sound is achieved through the basso continuo part being instructed to play *tasto solo*. This involves the removal of bass stringed instruments from the continuo texture, leaving only the organ, which is not to supply a chordal layer above, as would normally be realized, but only supply the written bass notes.

Also in this movement, "Vivaldi introduces one of his main 'allusive' motives...best known from its appearance in bars 59-63 of the first movement of Vivaldi's 'Spring' Concerto (op. VIII, no. 1/RV 269), where it signals the cautious re-

emergence of the songbirds after a thunderstorm...It is not possible to assign a very precise semantic significance to the motive, but when it appears in a context for which words are provided, there is often an indication that some action or process is being initiated.”¹³² It is possible in the instance of the fourth movement of *Nisi Dominus* that this signifies a gradual awakening from slumber. “Whether or not Vivaldi intended it to be so, this movement has a distinctly tragic cast, not once escaping from the minor mode.”¹³³ This motive can be seen in measures six through eight of *Cum dederit* in the example below:

Example 7. Vivaldi’s allusive motive.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Contralto, and Bass. The music is in 12/8 time and B-flat major. Measures 6 through 8 are shown. Violin I has a melodic line with a long arch in measure 8. Violin II and Viola play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Contralto is silent. Bass plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

While this movement does indeed inspire the required gentle affect, Vivaldi at the same time displays a high level of virtuosity with the layering of multiple techniques.

“Between tender string ritornellos there are far-flung, expressive melodic arches which show Vivaldi to have been a melodist of the first rank.”¹³⁴ Although the vocal line itself does not carry the outward signs of virtuosic writing, the expressive length of phrasing

¹³² Ibid., 275.

¹³³ Ibid., 276.

¹³⁴ Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work*, 201.

poses a distinct challenge to the singer with regard to breath management and dynamic control. The heavily muted strings, unsupported continuo part, and general theme of the piece surely inspire an overall necessity for a soft dynamic level. That combined with a few phrases of slightly higher tessitura for the contralto voice make for an intensely concentrated and effective scene.

V. *Sicut sagittae*

Sicut sagittae in manu potentis: ita filii excussorum.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children born in one's youth.

In this movement one uncovers an example of Vivaldi's unique approach to tonal schemes. While clearly centered and cadentially grounded in the key of E-flat major, Vivaldi indicated only two flats in the key signature.

The most obvious indication of modal precepts underlying Vivaldi's tonal organization is the way in which he chose to notate key signatures. A significant number of compositions in certain tonalities (including entire cycles and separate arias and instrumental movements) employ key signatures considered "incomplete" according to the standards of common-practice tonality. The tonalities affected are only the flat keys, G and C minor, and their relative majors, Bb and Eb, along with F minor. These frequently feature one flat fewer in their key signature, although the "missing" accidental is entered separately wherever needed in the score.¹³⁵

The generation prior to Vivaldi and some contemporaries seem to have notated key signatures in strict conformity with the system of church tones and their derivations, which would account for missing accidentals. "By contrast, most of Vivaldi's slightly younger followers (such as Carlo Tessarini, Angelo Maria Scaccia, Giuseppe Tartini, and Michele Stratico) select key signatures in accordance with common practice."¹³⁶ Vivaldi himself did not adhere exclusively to the one missing flat system however. Many examples show a delineating line between vocal and instrumental works, but there are also numerous examples of discrepancy among the same genre, such as throughout different arias of the same opera. Lest we deduce that this was a mistake or a copyist's hasty omission, Brover-Lubovsky points out that the "two possible manners of notating some tonalities freely alternate in a significant number of works from the Turin manuscripts, which are mostly in Vivaldi's own hand, establishing beyond doubt that the

¹³⁵ Brover-Lubovsky, *Tonal Space in the Music of Antonio Vivaldi*, 63.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 66.

ambiguity in indicating key signatures was the composer's own.”¹³⁷ Furthermore, as the author points out, the adherence to church modes was practiced by some composers and theorists of the time, and not others, and therefore suggests that Vivaldi's “manner of notating his tonalities is thus adduced as a tangible indication of contemporary instability with regard to the concept of tonal organization.”¹³⁸

One of the outstanding qualities which pervades much of the string writing in this movement is the use of unison texture. Talbot explains that this technique is “a typical way of representing strength, as described in the phrase ‘*in manu potentis*’.”¹³⁹ He also feels that this movement “is the perfect antidote to sleep. The ‘arrow’ is illustrated by general briskness and the ‘mighty man’ by the use of wide intervals (standing for self-confidence) and frequent unison passages. With good reason, it is as emphatically in the major mode (E flat major) as *Cum dederit somnum* was in the minor mode.”¹⁴⁰

Example 8. Text painting in *Sicut sagittae*.

The musical score for Example 8, titled "Text painting in *Sicut sagittae*", features five staves: Violin I (VI I), Violin II (VI II), Viola (Vla), Contralto, and Bass. The music is in E-flat major and 3/4 time. The lyrics are: "Si-cut sa - git-tae in ma-nu po - ten-tis, in". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *(p)* (piano). The number 7 is written above the first measure of the Violin I and Violin II staves.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹³⁹ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso*, RV 608. ed. Michael Talbot, 68.

¹⁴⁰ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 276.

Kolneder further points out that the motivic symbols in the vocal line are also representative of Vivaldi's operatic style. In the vocal line, the words associated with power/strength/warrior and youth/children are fittingly given the most active and melismatic treatment:

Example 9. Operatic treatment in the vocal line.

The musical score for Example 9 is presented in a system of five staves. The top three staves are for Violin I (VI I), Violin II (VI II), and Viola (Vla). The fourth staff is for Contralto, and the bottom staff is for Basso. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The score begins at measure 14, indicated by a '14' above the first measure of the Violin I staff. The vocal line (Contralto) has the lyrics 'ma - nu po - ten - - - - - tis: i - ta' written below it. The instrumental parts feature a fast, rhythmic melody in the Violin I and II parts, while the Viola and Basso provide a steady, supporting accompaniment.

Additionally evocative of an operatic style, this movement alone contains the greatest span of the required vocal range for the nine-movement piece overall (an octave plus a fourth) and also includes repeated use of the lowest note of any section (Bb below middle C). It is also the second longest movement of the work, at 106 measures, but speeds along with virtuosic intensity as reflected in the textual image of fast-paced arrows shot from the warrior's hand.

VI. Beatus vir

*Beatus vir qui implevit desiderium suum ex ipsis:
non confundetur cum loquetur inimicis suis in porta.*

Blessed is the man who has filled his quiver with them
He will never be shamed when he speaks with his enemies at the gate.

The sixth movement of *Nisi Dominus* is the second to be scored for voice and continuo alone. While this simplicity contributes to “a delicious lyricism that captures the spirit of beatitude perfectly,”¹⁴¹ it is also rather significant to scholars who have assessed the approximate dating of the work. “One feature that marks out RV 608 as a work from Vivaldi’s first period of sacred music composition is the scoring of two movements (II and VI) for voice and continuo alone. Of Vivaldi’s extant sacred vocal works, only the *Laudate pueri Dominum*, RV 600, also retains this simple, cantata-like texture, which was rapidly going out of fashion during the 1710s.”¹⁴² Only twelve measures in length, this section firmly returns to the key of Bb major.

Certain elements of the text in this verse seem to belie the mood and text painting which would be required of the composer. Specifically, the treatment of *inimicis*, which means either enemies or foes, might inspire some to set the text with a more forceful mood or possibly a thicker texture to summon more colorful or dramatic images. However, these foes mentioned at the gate (*in porta*) refer “not to enemies besieging the walls of a city but to adversaries in litigation. Lawcourts functioned in the open area near the main city gate. The more adult sons a man had, the more forceful he would appear in disputes.”¹⁴³ This is also explicative of continuing the imagery of a man’s children as

¹⁴¹ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 276.

¹⁴² Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso, RV 608*. ed. Michael Talbot, 65.

¹⁴³ *Saint Joseph Edition of The New American Bible*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1991), 690n.

arrows and why he is blessed who has his quiver full of them. Here we can again speculate that Vivaldi's knowledge and training as a priest might have served him well in regard to uncovering and musically illustrating the true meaning of the text. The Andante tempo and steady eighth-note pace of the basso continuo help to achieve a stately yet uncomplicated beauty which is mirrored in the lyrical vocal line.

Example 10. Opening of *Beatus vir*.

VI Andante

Contralto

Be - a - tus vir qui im -

Basso

(p)

4

Contralto

- ple - vit de - si - de - ri - um suum ex i - psis: non con - fun - de - tur eum lo - que - tur i - ni - mi - cis

Basso

With this movement the psalm proper is concluded, however, the remaining three movements are devoted to the lesser Doxology, which would always have been included at the end of the Psalm. A number of unusual aspects also appear within this last portion of music and text, as the next chapters will enumerate.

VII. Gloria Patri

Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

While not part of the Biblical text of the Psalm, this seventh movement is considered by many to be the emotional heart of the entire work. Although normally included at the end of the Psalm, the lesser Doxology is given rare treatment in RV 608 by being split up into three distinct movements. The *Gloria Patri* is the first of these. Though the texture is thinner, with only the continuo and one obbligato instrument accompanying the singer, it is the *coup de théâtre* according to Michael Talbot. One of the most unique aspects occurs in Vivaldi's choice of obbligato instrument: the viola d'amore. This instrument "belonged to a small group of instruments primarily manufactured and cultivated in Germany and Austria but which gained a toehold in Venice, in particular at the Pietà."¹⁴⁴ Vivaldi wrote for the instrument in twelve known compositions: in eight concertos (RV 97, 392-397 and 540), six of which were solo concertos for the instrument, his oratorio *Juditha triumphans*, the opera *Tito Manlio*, the present *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608, and the newly discovered (May 2003) second setting of *Nisi Dominus*, RV 803. This seventh movement of RV 608 is exceptional for "having one of only two viola d'amore parts in Vivaldi's extant music to be notated according to its fingering (as interpreted by a violinist) rather than according to its sound. To do this, Vivaldi employs a system very similar to the one adopted by Attilio Ariosti in his six 'lessons' for the instrument published in London in 1724."¹⁴⁵ Harry Danks, author of one of the very few tomes in the English language dedicated solely to the instrument says of

¹⁴⁴ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 276.

¹⁴⁵ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso*, RV 608. ed. Michael Talbot, 68.

Ariosti's lessons: "Position moves are indicated by clef signs—a most unusual method—and there are many accidentals. In fact it is about the most complicated system one could devise to persuade violinists to take up the viola d'amore. The years that have passed without a true and scholarly version of the Lessons is indicative of the unwillingness of player or scholar to commit themselves to a playing edition."¹⁴⁶ A closer examination of the instrument itself is necessary to appreciate its exclusive and uncommon character.

The viola d'amore has in common with the viol family a flat back and sloping shoulders, but is played under the chin, as a violin or typical viola. The uniqueness of the instrument occurs mostly in the number and placement of the strings:

Its distinctive sound results from two sets of strings, one above the other. The upper set of (usually) 6 or 7 playing strings is played on with a bow that is slightly lighter in weight than the violin bow. The second lay of strings are of brass and steel, and run from the base of the instrument through small holes drilled in the bridge, continuing beneath the fingerboard through a hollow made in the neck, finally emerging at the rear of the pegbox, to be attached to tuning pegs. These are 'sympathetic' strings, which are not touched by the bow, but resound and vibrate when the upper strings are played, giving the instrument its distinctive tone colour: a clear, ringing, but soft, silvery quality. The number of sympathetic strings usually coincides with those of the playing strings—though there are variations to this. 12, 14 or more strings require an equal number of tuning pegs and a pegbox to accommodate them must of necessity be larger than that of the violin with its 4 strings.¹⁴⁷

Very often, the top of the pegbox is mounted with a carved head, that of a blindfolded Cupid, which lends support to the name viol of love. However, another feature strongly points to eastern origin: the sound holes are almost always in the shape of flaming swords, which are very symbolic of Islam. It is even thought that the name viola d'amore could be a corruption of "viola da More," or "viol of the Moor."

¹⁴⁶ Harry Danks, *The Viola d'amore*, (Halesowen, England: Stephen Bonner, 1979), 26.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

Though this instrument adds a distinct and lush tone color, the problems associated with notation and playing it are many. The first and possibly most problematic subject is that of tuning. From its beginnings in the seventeenth century, with its varying number of strings, the viola d'amore did not have a standard tuning scheme as we would think for a regular stringed instrument. For the greater part of the eighteenth century the viola d'amore was tuned in the key of the individual composition it was used to play, but by the end of the century the D minor or major tuning, which seemed to suit the instrument well, came to be the norm ($d-a-d'-f'-a'-d''$). This is also the most common tuning which Vivaldi used. Otherwise, the instrument could be assigned a *scordatura*, which comes from the Italian verb *scordare* literally meaning “to mistune.” This system “enjoyed a particular vogue between 1600 and 1750. It offered novel colours, timbres and sonorities, alternative harmonic possibilities and, in some cases, extension of an instrument’s range. It could also assist in imitating other instruments, and facilitate the execution of whole compositions or make possible various passages involving wide intervals, intricate string crossing or unconventional double stopping.”¹⁴⁸ This was popular in Germany, France and Italy, and Vivaldi was among the composers who preserved the practice. By definition, any tuning of the violin and viola “other than their established tunings ($g-d'-a'-e''$ and $c-g-d''-a'$ respectively) is defined as *scordatura*.”¹⁴⁹ Conversely, the term *accordatura* is used to mean the normal, or standard, tuning. In the case of the viola d'amore, which has no official standard, the two terms can be variously applied to a confusing degree. The case for our particular musical

¹⁴⁸ David Boyden and Robin Stowell, “Scordatura,” *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/41698> (accessed July 19, 2013).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

work is described by Vivaldi scholar Michael Talbot. Here Vivaldi employs a system in which the two lowest strings are ignored, and thereby treats the instrument as if it were a regular violin, but simply tuned differently (hence the *scordatura* discussion). Depending on the tuning system adopted (which was the aforementioned D minor), any of the strings can act as an independent transposing instrument. The player is directed by the notation to the fingering appropriate to a normally tuned violin, and the resulting note is the same, or higher, or lower, according to the tuning which the composer selected (again, the notes of the D minor triad). “It is vital, of course to know on which string a given note must sound. Vivaldi, like Ariosti, follows a simple rule of thumb: the note is played on the highest possible string. In practice this means that open strings are preferred to stopped strings, and first position (on strings IV, III, and II) to higher positions. The great merit of this system was that it allowed violinists to play the viola d’amore proficiently with minimum prior experience.”¹⁵⁰ The relationship between string, notated pitch, and sounding pitch is shown below.

TABLE 3. *Scordatura* tuning.¹⁵¹

String	IV →	III →	II →	I →
Notation	g a	d' e'	a' b' c'' d''	e'' f#'' g'' a'' b'' c#'' d''' e''' etc.
Sound	d' e'	f' g'	a' b' c'' d''	d'' e'' f'' g'' a'' b'' c''' d''' etc.

The present Critical Edition of the score, published by Ricordi and edited by Michael Talbot, includes two staves for the viola d’amore part. The top line is the original notation, and below that is the *realizzazione*, or the actual sounding pitches. The opening

¹⁵⁰ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso, RV 608*. ed. Michael Talbot, 68.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 69.

ritornello is shown here to illustrate the wide leaps and double stops required of the player and characteristic of the use of *scordatura*.

Example 11. Opening of *Gloria Patri*.

VII Larghetto

Viola d'amore •

(f)

(realizzazione)

(f)

Contralto

Basso

(f)

organo solo

6

Vla d'am.

Contralto

Basso

While there are no surviving documents or reports concerning the individuals who might have premiered the *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608, the closest assumption we can make would be regarding this movement. The Pietà was particularly noted for its excellent string players,

and one in particular was of great renown: Anna Maria. She was singled out by historians, travelers and poets alike for her impressive musical abilities and is known to have excelled at many instruments, including the viola d'amore. Vivaldi himself unmistakably associated two of his concertos for the instrument with her name, via its initials, which he entitled "Concerto per/con viola d'AMore" (RV393 and 397). Her name is found among Pietà records as early as 1712 and it is possible that this movement of RV 608 was written for or played by her.

Among scholarly writings on Vivaldi's sacred music, this seventh movement is found to be the most extolled of all parts of RV 608. Of it Landon says that "the praise for the Holy Trinity appears like some marvelous dream, a trance of beauty. This must be a highpoint in the whole of Vivaldi's music."¹⁵² By far, the most descriptive is Michael Talbot, who is fittingly the current Vivaldi scholar without equal:

The two marvellous things about this movement are its serene unhurriedness, and the complexity of the emotions and images that it evokes. Certainly, Vivaldi here celebrates the Holy Trinity in a spirit of rapt wonderment (accentuated by the silvery tone of the obbligato instrument) and in so doing aligns this movement with countless others. But alongside the veneration there exists a subversive undercurrent that testifies more to human struggle than to divine perfection. Those laborious quavers in the first bar and subsequently convey a sense of obstacles surmounted, while chromatic inflections (e.g., in bar 7) almost take us back to the vale of tears. In this intensely personal statement, Vivaldi seems to be saying that God is to be praised not because of his benefits already received or promised for the future but even in their absence; as in the Book of Job, piety is reduced to its disinterested core.¹⁵³

Rather than a brilliant song of praise which would have been demanded by tradition or by text, this Larghetto movement is more introspective, and thus harkens back to the much-desired element of surprise which was so admired by the Venetians. Vocally, this section requires the highest range and tessitura of the singer, extremely expansive breath lines,

¹⁵² Landon, *Vivaldi*, 87.

¹⁵³ Talbot, *The Sacred Vocal Music*, 279.

successions of trills, and a final declamation in the lowest register of the piece. Easily recognizable are the myriad references to the tripartite structure of the Holy Trinity: the first being the 3/4 time signature and abundance of triplet figures within both the vocal line and the solo viola d'amore. Secondly, while mostly independent in its own right, the viola d'amore links up with the vocal line at three distinct locations: measures 40-42, 56-66, and 70-73. Additionally, each of these pairings is exactly in thirds, inverted thirds, or set off by thirds.

As discussed above, Vivaldi's key signatures were issued in a somewhat haphazard way—occasionally in a modal manner, with one flat “missing,” or else according to modern notation. The *Gloria Patri* movement is the only one to be originally notated with one flat, all the rest being issued with two flats.

VIII. Sicut erat

Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen
As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

For the penultimate movement, Vivaldi returns to the home key of G minor, as in the opening portion, along with the designations of tempo Allegro and the meter of common time. However, the similarities do not end there. “Vivaldi nearly always exploits the punning potential of the words ‘*in principio*’ in the second verse of the Lesser Doxology by making the movement in which they occur a paraphrase, usually abbreviated, of the opening movement—a practice that produces a satisfying ‘rounding’ effect signaling closure.”¹⁵⁴ The opening ritornello does in fact return in its exact form, simply minus the repeated or echoed sections. The longest and most coloratura passage is assigned in this movement to the word *saeculorum* referring to world without end: another fitting play on words.

Example 12. Coloratura passage in *Sicut erat*.

The musical score for Example 12, titled "Coloratura passage in *Sicut erat*", shows a section starting at measure 20. It features five staves: Violin I (VI I), Violin II (VI II), Viola (Vla), Contralto, and Basso. The Violin and Viola parts are mostly rests. The Contralto part has a complex coloratura passage with the lyrics "et in sae-cu-la sae-cu-lo". The Basso part provides a bass line with a (p) dynamic marking.

¹⁵⁴ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso*, RV 608. ed. Michael Talbot, 69.

The first divergence in vocal periods comes with the third entrance of the contralto: here it is shortened by one measure but cadences still on a Bb tonality. The following short ritornello remains the same, but then Vivaldi skips entrances four, five, six, seven and eight, and proceeds to the ninth entrance, almost exactly equating measures 51-57 with measures 20-26 of *Sicut erat*. Both of these phrases end the same way, back in G minor, but what follows in this eighth movement is a compression of the final ritornello from movement one—from six measures down to three. From there the listener is set up directly for the next and final movement.

IX. Amen

Amen, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen
Amen, world without end. Amen.

The final movement of the *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608 carries a few distinctions. First of all, it is the longest movement of the whole work, at 110 bars, but it hardly sounds that way to the listener because of its quick pace and fantastic coloratura displays for both voice and strings. It is the sole movement which brings the voice part into the texture first, dispensing with any opening ritornello figure. It does have a short harmonic progression reminiscent of movements I and VIII (which were themselves related in the previous chapter). Here the harmony of measures 21-27 bears a slight resemblance to that of measures 55-57 (I) and the corresponding 24-26 (VIII). The remaining passages are of new material. Additionally unique to this movement is the volume of passages with no bass support (measures 41-16, 75-83, 87-92, and 96-101). To this point in the basso continuo part we have seen organ solo and *tasto solo*, but this is the first time in which the bottom texture completely drops out. At its first occurrence in measure 40 and again at measure 86 (which is nearly a repeat) we also see an unusual direction in dynamic markings: while the upper strings are given a piano dynamic, the viola is marked forte. The only force not employing sixteenth notes, perhaps this is to drive the rhythm in the absence of the continuo instruments. Talbot maintains that this is surely deliberate since the markings are consistent both times, however, he also states that here forte is equivalent to marcato.

A compositional device in the *Amen* movement also offers a chronology perspective, as did *Vanum est vobis* (movement II). In this case it is the text setting which gives a clue to its earlier dating. Rather than making this final section an unadulterated

Amen, Vivaldi pulls in another incomplete phrase from the previous movement. This is telling to scholars, as Talbot relates: “Another pointer to an early date is the occasional ‘scrambling’ of portions of the text or the reintroduction of phrases that have already occurred at an earlier point in the psalm (as seen in the unexpected reappearance of ‘et in saecula saeculorum’ during the final *Amen*); with greater experience, Vivaldi can to set vocal texts (also in his operas and cantatas) in a tidier, more straightforward way.”¹⁵⁵

One of the most prevalent challenges to the singer in this movement is the dominance of large-scale sixteenth-note phrases, most especially those which employ a small, or tight, scope of range, as seen in measures 95 and 96 in the example below:

Example 13. Measures 93-98 of *Amen*.

The musical score for measures 93-98 of the 'Amen' movement from Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus* (RV 608) is presented. The score includes staves for Violin I (VI I), Violin II (VI II), Viola (Vla), Contralto, and Basso. Measures 93-98 are shown. The Violin parts feature sixteenth-note passages with dynamics *f* and *pp*. The Viola part has a *p* dynamic. The Contralto part has lyrics '- men, a - - - -'. The Basso part has a *(f)* dynamic. The piano accompaniment is also shown.

In this kind of movement it is additionally rare that the ritornello portions are equal in substance to the vocal portion. This “extra” *Amen* movement is said to be modeled on the typical *Alleluia* finale of a solo motet.

¹⁵⁵ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso*, RV 608. ed. Michael Talbot, 65.

CHAPTER 8

The Vocal Performer's Perspective

Many singers and teachers alike agree that baroque music is a balm for the voice. Although this type of music presents its own challenges, those challenges can go hand in hand with the fostering of healthy vocal habits and a mastery of basic techniques that are required in vocal music of almost any time period or style. Some of these vital points are legato singing, agility, traversing large leaps, long breath lines, intonation, and phrasing. Each one of these challenges is present within the small scope of Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus*, *RV 608*. Alongside these technical aspects, the performer can also greatly benefit from even a cursory examination of structure and harmony, which, as this chapter will illuminate, directly relates to many of the vocal considerations for a consummate performance.

The concept of legato is paramount within the entire scope of vocal repertoire, in any genre, style, or time period. Vivaldi offers the singer a few luxuriant opportunities to display this in his *Nisi Dominus*. The most obvious examples are the two short movements that are scored for voice and continuo alone: *Vanum est vobis* (II) and *Beatus vir* (VI). The general exposed nature of this setting provides ample opportunity for the singer to predominate. As discussed above, the dotted French overture style of movement two is evident from the very beginning. The vocal line, in contrast, has many instances of smoothness, stepwise motion and expressivity. Measures 15 through 17 are an excellent example of this. The tied note and descending step-wise line which follows facilitate a greatly expressive moment. The crispness of the voiced consonant on *vanum* can be played against the ensuing longest note of the movement, crescendo-ed and then glided

Example 16. Movement 7, measures 50-53.



Needless to say, agility is a hallmark of baroque music, but every voice type is encouraged to practice some form of movement to help the voice remain light, supple, and flexible. Vivaldi was a masterful proponent of florid figurations. Measures upon measures of sixteenth notes color the pages of a great percentage of his scores, both vocal and instrumental. This can be a great deterrent to many singers as they approach music like *Nisi Dominus*. Too many singers overlook the often simplistic structure within that spray of ink. Vivaldi in particular is known for his penchant for sequential figures. Combine that with his inventive, yet predictable harmonic language and one can break down any of the composer's lengthy coloratura passages into recognizable patterns, figures, or outlines. In this way the singer can identify smaller portions or groups of notes to learn and simply use the patterns to repeat or alter them, making one much longer phrase. In *Nisi Dominus* the composer uses triadic figures, chordal outlines, sequences or circular harmonic progressions to form all of his extended or melismatic phrases. Recognizing this not only speeds the learning process, but also aids in memorization because each phrase makes very good sense. In this way, Vivaldi makes his music, while sounding just as virtuosic, much more accessible than some other composers whose compositional schemes are not so easily deduced. (Though all operating in the same century, many singers know that Handel, Gluck and Mozart coloratura passages are not the same animal, for instance.) In the example below from the opening movement, the lengthy passage of sixteenth notes is broken into two simple figures with only one final

alteration. Note also that the first notes of each figure also form patterns: figure one is step-wise motion down (B flat, A, G), figure two is step-wise motion up (F, G, A, B flat). The only challenge is recognizing the alteration of the raised sixth scale degree (B natural) which goes to the leading tone (C sharp) in the final grouping of four notes. Assigning prominence to these notes not only points to the figurations and helps provide clarity of delivery, but also aids the singer vocally: by using these notes as demarcations or “important” notes, one can lighten the rest of the voice line—the “unimportant notes”—to increase the velocity and facilitate an even and adequate flow of breath to accommodate the entire line.

Example 17. Dissecting Vivaldi coloratura.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G minor (three flats). The first staff, starting at measure 38, contains three groups of notes labeled 'figure 1' with brackets. These figures are descending step-wise motions: B-flat, A, G. The lyrics 'qui cu - sto' are written below the first two measures. The second staff, starting at measure 40, contains four groups of notes labeled 'figure 2' with brackets, followed by a group labeled 'figure 2 altered'. These figures are ascending step-wise motions: F, G, A, B-flat. The lyrics 'dit, qui cu' are written below the final two measures.

Far too many additional examples occur in the remainder of the score to list here, but all of the florid passages have easily recognizable features such as those mentioned above. Any of them would benefit from the same analysis and avail the singer of an exceptional learning tool.

Vivaldi’s use of sequential passages is combined with the large leaps associated with the “mighty man” of movement five (*Sicut sagittae*). The pattern of descending notes is also seen in the first note of each figure (B flat, A flat, G, F, E flat). Again, accentuating these first notes of the figure helps the singer to convey strength and vitality

while not punching the top notes. The pattern is simple: up a fourth, down a sixth and one step up to the first note of the next pattern.

Example 18. Sequences.



All of the examples shown above could easily and effectively serve as vocalises themselves, or be used to form the basis of new ones particular to each challenging passage of music. Identifying these patterns, especially in baroque music, is the key to quick study, healthy habits, and working smart—not hard. So many singers endlessly waste their voices attempting to learn long passages simply note by note, giving each equal weight and never understanding the ease of the systems or patterns. Oftentimes this sole focus on seemingly pattern-less notes leads to practice with bad posture or breath support, increased tension in the voice and unsatisfactory results.

One of the most overlooked areas in the study of a score among singers is, regrettably, an analysis of functional harmony. Many singers pay little or no attention to parts other than their own and this only leads to unnecessary hardships, missed opportunities, or unimaginative renderings. This is not to say that all singers must be advanced music theorists or painstaking de-constructors of the score. Rather, this should be a tool to speed the learning or understanding of the music. One of the characteristics of Vivaldi's writing mentioned above is its predictability. This is not meant to be a negative descriptor. Many of the conventions which Vivaldi followed (as outlined in the chapters on individual movements) provide the listener with a very satisfying and rounded sense of completeness. They are also of great assistance to the singer. One of the simplest of

regardless of how complex their systems or conventions of composition become or how far towards the periphery of tonality they may stretch. While full of examples of sequences, formulas and recognizable patterns that attractively aid the singer in performance preparation, Vivaldi's music still contains a vitality and inventiveness that sparkles in performance and delights listeners.

CHAPTER 9

Original Sources and Vivaldi's Copyists

A final component of examination must inevitably be the source of the score itself. Looking to the original sources can provide insight to not only the music and the composer but also to approximate dating, style characteristics, and some history and activity of the composer. Vivaldi rarely dated any of his scores and we are left with few written personal correspondences, so much of his life must be reconstructed through employment and commission records, brief mentions of him in historical documents, and the music itself. Paper types, rastrography (the ruling of staves), ink and scribe characteristics have all been used to compile dates, locations, uses, and general activity of the Venetian composer. Researcher Paul Everett has made enormous headway into such areas and collected a wealth of information for study and consideration.

This paper has already discussed the lineage and circumstances of this score's discovery in the earlier topic of the Foà Collection which is housed in the Turin Library. More specifically, what survives for RV 608 "is a set of separate parts in upright format, eleven in all, preserved at Turin in the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria under the shelfmark Foà 40, fols 269-298. The Turin manuscripts preserve the composer's personal musical collection, so it is a near-certainty that the parts were copied out, and presumably also used, for performances given under the composer's direction, and in which he himself played the violin and the viola d'amore."¹⁵⁶ Although it is generally accepted that *Nisi Dominus* was composed for the *figlie di coro* of the Pietà, it is safe to assume that these particular parts were prepared for a performance (or performances) outside of

¹⁵⁶ Antonio Vivaldi, *Nisi Dominus: Salmo 126 per contralto, due violini, viola e basso, RV 608*. ed. Michael Talbot, 65.

that institution, since the Pietà normally used its own copyists to prepare its performance materials. These parts are not written in the style, or hand, of those copyists. In fact, there are five separate hands, aside of Vivaldi's, which comprise the parts, which are basically in two groupings. Neither set is complete in itself, although the earlier group (which Talbot calls "A") is mostly complete. One may then rightly ask: Why are there two sets of parts and how is it that we can comprise a complete performance? Based on the difference in paper, ink and markings, the two sets of parts were made at different times and obviously prepared by different scribes. Vivaldi expert Michael Talbot suggests that Group B represents a later version of the score, which accounts for its incompleteness. The main reason for a different version was the bass part.

There is a consistent pattern in the variation between the undifferentiated bass part in Group A and the slightly differentiated violone and bass parts in Group B. The Group B parts have a less active, more static bass line that makes less use of chord inversions and more use of repeated notes (in the manner of the *Trommelbass*, so deplored by Quantz). This is exactly the kind of difference that exists between the pre-1720 and post-1720 versions of certain violin sonatas, of which RV 7 and RV 22 offer the most blatant examples. It seems that Vivaldi quite consciously opted for a new approach in shaping bass parts around the time of his Mantuan sojourn (1718-1720) and took the opportunity, when 'reissuing' older works, to adjust them in conformity with the change. He may well have recopied the alto part of the *Nisi Dominus* not because of any new thoughts related to the vocal line but on account of a wish to make modifications to the bass as he went along—a task that could not be entrusted to a copyist.¹⁵⁷

As was the custom of the time, the vocal part was written with basso continuo, and indeed, the alto part (found in Group B) is almost entirely in Vivaldi's own hand. A professional copyist (scribe 13) was responsible only for measures 69-102 of the final movement. The missing vocal part from Group A may have been removed as no longer current when that belonging to Group B was completed, since it now contained a new bass line. To create a critical edition of the score for publication and complete

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 67.

performance, the editors have combined the two sources: “Since the earlier version is in any case superior musically to the later one, which in some places noticeably coarsens the harmony and texture, there is every justification to base the edition on the parts in Group A plus (*faute de mieux*) the alto part—ignoring its bass—from Group B.”¹⁵⁸ This is how the published score exists today.

What does this say about its usage? It could point to a possible location of additional performances. All of the paper from Group A is Venetian in origin, which would coincide with the work being composed for and premiered at the Pietà. It is possible that a performance took place in Mantua or other centers on Vivaldi’s route there and back. The paper from Group B however, is a dense brown-colored paper of a different size. “A link to Rome is suggested...by the blackness of the ink, the absence of vertical guidelines framing the staves (normal in Venetian papers), the use of ‘short’ rastrals that need to make more than one pass to rule the staves for a page, and the prominence of Roman composers in the repertory copied.”¹⁵⁹

The manuscript also offers clues to an approximation, at least, of date. “One important clue to dating is the visual appearance of the time signatures used in the autograph part. This allows the lower figure to ‘droop’ a considerable distance below the stave. In connection with triple metres, Everett has defined this as a ‘transitional’ form, distinguishable from both the earlier form (contained vertically—or almost—within the stave) and the later form (reduced to a large ‘3’). He assigns the transitional form to the years leading up to 1720.”¹⁶⁰ Considering this along with Vivaldi’s known trip to Mantua in 1717 and the necessity for him to produce sacred vocal works after 1713, the year of

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 68.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Gasparini's departure from the Pietà, we can pinpoint the plausible date to be 1715, along with a convincing likelihood of July 2, as that was the patronal feast of the Pietà, the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for whose vespers service was prescribed the use of Psalm 126, *Nisi Dominus*. Of additional importance is a characteristic of Scribe 4, who copied five of the seven parts comprising Group A: "The copyist's bass clef, in some sources, is large, with a loop extending to, or beyond, the lowest line of the stave...in the rest, it is a distinctively smaller form. The interpretation of non-textual factors and the likely dates of opera scores indicate that the larger style is the earlier one, and that scribe 4 changed his habit in c. 1717."¹⁶¹ In RV 608, Scribe 4's bass clefs are of the larger style.

Scribe 4 is of particular interest not only to RV 608 but also to a broader spectrum of authenticity and personal collaboration with Antonio Vivaldi. Of course, the many scores which are completely in Vivaldi's own hand pose no question of authenticity or status as definitive, but as there are so many examples of other hands in his work—especially in the Turin collection where RV 608 is found—the question might arise as to the legitimacy of those works. "Such an assumption, harmless perhaps as a general rule of thumb when manuscripts are examined initially, needs always to be challenged in the case of Vivaldi's music now that evidence is emerging of direct connections between the activities of some scribes and the composer."¹⁶² While it is hardly likely that we can ever be certain about the identities of any of Vivaldi's many copyists, Paul Everett points to Scribe 4 as an example of this significance. The first stand-out is the sheer number of major tasks that he undertook by himself, in addition to many manuscripts which were

¹⁶¹ Paul Everett, "Vivaldi's Italian Copyists," *Informazioni e studi Vivaldiani*, vol. 11 (1990): 34.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

produced in collaboration with other scribes. In fact his prominence can even be likened to a supervisor or substitution for the composer himself in some circumstances. Everett describes the handwriting as “a superb example of the elegant yet perfectly legible kind of musical calligraphy generally in vogue in early eighteenth century Venice.”¹⁶³ This consistently mature, neat and accurate style indicates “that he was a professional musician, possibly of more advanced years than Vivaldi himself, who had mastered his craft before the 1710s.”¹⁶⁴ Examples of Scribe 4’s hand in Vivaldi’s music range from the early 1710s through about 1731, and there was never any indication that the composer treated him as an inexperienced novice. Everett also points to the fact the this scribe was involved, in varying degrees and barring those that are completely autograph, in the compilation of all of Vivaldi’s opera scores from 1713 to 1731 which survive in the Turin collection as “unequivocal indication of how centrally he was involved in Vivaldi’s most important work and how close his personal relationship with the composer must have been.”¹⁶⁵ Additionally, scribe 4 seems to have not been at the disposal of various theaters, composer-clients or institutions, as most other scribes would have. His hand is also noticeably absent from other Venetian manuscripts of the time. Everett concludes that scribe 4 is none other than the composer’s father—Giovanni Battista Vivaldi! The elder Vivaldi is indeed the obvious candidate when one regards his experience as a professional and well-respected violinist: his free time as a member of the orchestra of San Marco would have allowed him the occasion to reliably assist his son, and his reputation would serve him well to secure associations with opera houses and professional contracts for the advancement of Antonio’s career. If this supposition is

¹⁶³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 35.

correct, it not only illuminates a charming aspect of Vivaldi's healthy familial relationship, but also lends great authority and legitimacy to the scores on which scribe 4 collaborated. Perhaps one of the many factors that enabled Antonio Vivaldi to be such a prolific and self-proclaimed speedy composer was the fact that he was able to have complete faith in his father's ability to compile and create accurate and lasting examples of his performance materials. Certainly this can never be proven, but it is an intriguing prospect. It has long been thought that Giovanni Battista was Vivaldi's main musical instructor. Did he continue to help Antonio hone his craft for the remaining years of his life by working alongside of him and being so closely associated with his musical scores? Indeed there is much still which we do not know about the details of Vivaldi's life and methods, but the great volume of music which exists today continues to spark the interest and amazement of musicians and audiences around the world.

CHAPTER 10

Conclusion

The student of Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus*, RV 608 will find him-/her-self looking through a window in time to an entire era, most especially at the music, culture and history of the city of Venice and one of its most famous sons: Antonio Vivaldi. The compositional and symbolic techniques used in this work offer characteristics of a broad spectrum of Vivaldi's *oeuvre*, even across multiple genres. One will also delve into the beginnings of the modern conservatory system of musical training, as well as some historical context of western liturgical forms and a key to finding biblical translations, which served as impetus and text for a great number of Vivaldi's vocal compositions. This particular score also serves as an excellent model for vocal considerations relating to the performance of baroque music in general.

Possibly most important of all, however, is the example this score provides of the genius of Antonio Vivaldi and the rightful place his compositions have (only quite recently) taken in the history of music. Examining the score, its context, the life and environment of its composer and the ways in which a performer can bring the music to life also gives credence to the great resurgence of interest in Vivaldi and music of the baroque era.

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